

# MacBethany

**Homecoming Court**

*Book Two*

Nicholas Grubbs

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These include but are not limited to: assault and violence, bullying, depression, anxiety, self-harm, panic attacks and anxiety attacks, parental abuse, substance abuse, abusive relationships, homophobia, revenge porn, sexual assault, and suicide.

Reader discretion is advised.

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*To my family - thank you for being there.*

*To my friends - thank you for putting up with me.*

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*To Norm Macdonald - thank you for “The Moth Joke”*

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## **ABSOLUTE POWER**

## Beth

*“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.”*

This snippet of a much larger quote, which has been paraphrased by wannabe scholars and social media intellectuals for nearly two centuries, originated from Lord John Dalberg-Acton, a long-dead British writer and Member of Parliament. The meaning itself, in my humble opinion, is pretty self-explanatory. Anyone who has ever written an essay on a historical leader of men like Joseph Stalin or Winston Churchill or FDR or basically any monarch that has ever lived has probably said some paraphrased version of this quote when explaining their heinous actions and how the leader became the person they would become.

As someone with a great interest in history, I did a little light reading on the background of this quote in the lead-up to the election. I swear by the view that context and background is vital to everything. In this case, Lord Acton was a rather prominent politician in the mid-late 19th century. He was a leader of the Catholic faction in the predominantly Protestant British government and had very strong views on the state of the Church at the time as they struggled to maintain their grip on Europe in the wake of liberalism and revolution.

Acton was also a strong supporter and lobbyist for the American Confederacy during the course of our Civil War.

Lord Acton believed that they were the morally superior cause and believed their defense of states' rights was just. If he had his way, the British would have intervened in the Civil War to help topple the corrupt, radical, and tyrannical Abraham Lincoln and protect the rights of the (white) people of the American South.

Where the fuck do I even begin with this one?

First, let us discuss the pure hypocrisy of the idea of a Catholic—a religion who believes all life is precious and should be protected—supporting a slave state and their endeavor to keep their slaves. Every day, the Twitter feeds of millions of users are flooded with the latest incident in the debate over abortion or contraception or school shootings or whatever else is the hot topic of the week that is used as an excuse to call for donations to a political campaign of your choosing that ultimately end up doing nothing because the politicians want to ensure the issue so it never goes away and more money keeps flowing in as people get more and more afraid. A truly vicious cycle.

It was no different back then with Lord Acton either. Humanity is so easily corruptible and will follow the strongest figure in the room with little resistance. They would allow and enable an institution as purely evil as slavery to exist because they believe their leader is justified in supporting it because... reasons. Or because they were raised to think one race inferior to theirs. Or because a religious text first written thousands of years ago said slavery is cool.

If life is so precious, why should entire races of people be treated like shit while you tell yourself that *you* will get into Heaven? Why can you say you are destined for eternal serenity while supporting the people that own slaves?

Second, it is very ironic that the man who believes that power corrupts wants a rebellious government to break away from their original country and allow their own brand of corruption to spread, specifically in the form of an invasion of the Caribbean to gain more slave states.

Using the explanation of “states' rights” to justify a rebellion that forms another government that ultimately will cause more pain and suffering in the world does not sit well with me and I question how it

sat well with Lord Acton. Even worse, and even more ironically, he was an *open critic* of slavery and spoke against it while in office. The catch? He believed that it was equally immoral to take the slaves from their masters and free them, feeling it was theft of property. Freeing people from bondage is as bad as chaining them to the pole and whipping them until their backs look like checkerboards, at least according to Lord Acton.

Third, and this is a big one, the idea of “The Lost Cause Myth” is the most hilarious thing ever to me. The ultimate counter to the “states’ rights” argument is the following question: the states’ rights to what? Anyone who tries to keep arguing needs only be shown a PDF copy of the Confederate Constitution and type in the words “slave” and “negro” in the search bar to see just what that little group of wannabe revolutionaries was all about. The Federal government may have butchered Reconstruction because Andrew Johnson was a corrupt racist and the Northerners may have become filthy little carpetbaggers who exploited a war-torn South for their own personal gain, but it all could have been avoided.

Any man who believes that the South had a right to rebel and that it was immoral to take their slaves away should not be giving lectures on the issue of absolute power corrupting absolutely. It is so laughably backwards that I almost choked on the water I was drinking when I was researching this topic.

So why do I bring this up?

The context of the statement is vital to understanding why he said it in the first place. Context is the most key thing to look for in history. You cannot claim to be doing history justice if you just see a quote you like and throw it on a paper for American History class. Anyone can throw down a quote about preserving nature in their Biology paper without realizing the speaker was noted conservationist and animal lover Adolf Hitler commenting on the need for *lebensraum* for the German people while simultaneously advocating for protecting the animals that live inside said *lebensraum* because he likes feeding baby deer and petting his dog who he had killed with a crushed up cyanide capsule to ensure his own capsule would work.

The context of the “absolute power” quote is rather funny with its real origins as well. Acton, also a noted Catholic writer, was commenting on the then-recent shift towards the concept of *papal infallibility* that was being pitched around the Vatican at the time of the First Vatican Council. What now serves as the basic concept that a Pope can never be wrong when preaching was a hotly contested issue back then. Acton opposed it vehemently and thought the idea of papal infallibility was insane. He even traveled to Rome to lobby against it on behalf of British Catholics. His efforts were in vain, however, and papal infallibility is now considered the law of the Catholic Church.

Anyone who looks past the zealous nature of the decree sees it for what it really is: a desperate last grasp at influencing the secular world while the blatant overreaching by the church was being lessened every year since the destruction of the Holy Roman Empire in the wake of the rise of liberalism and secularism in *dem-o-cratically* elected governments around the world. Bismarck, a man I am a personal fan of, was particularly against papal infallibility because he knew it was very clearly the Pope trying to regain lost influence over the German Empire after years of being a bitter ex.

Subsequent Popes would deny this and supporters of the Church will say it was “God’s Will” that that specific man be elected the leader of the Church and that his word goes while the rest of the Vatican would do things like criticizing Pope Francis for saying that being nice to gay people is actually an okay thing. Some people go so far as to say he is the anti-Christ for even considering such a thing. American Catholics can be some of the biggest hypocrites ever. They think having an ocean between them and

Rome gives them a free pass to bash the Pope. A couple hundred years ago, that kind of thing would get you burned at the stake.

How does one pick and choose what is considered “infallible” while also actively following a religion that preaches infallibility?

Having been through private Catholic school in the past, it was easily one of the first things that really drove me from the faith I was born into at an early age. How can a human being, imperfect creatures allegedly born of sin and can never understand God on a personal level, never say anything that is against God’s will while preaching their own interpretation of the word of God every time the guy who came before them died? It’s a terrible contradiction that borders on Catch-22 territory. It was all just a big political circus.

Acton was right to fight against it. Shame he lost.

This is the context that people miss when discussing the issue or when they copy and paste the quote on their paper and call it a day. Acton was worried about a man using the literal *Voice of God* to run a religion with billions of followers completely unchecked because, in his own words, he cannot be wrong. It was not about Kings having too much power or a President being allowed to bomb foreign nations without Congressional approval. It was a matter of religion he personally disagreed with.

And therein lies the hypocrisy of his views.

Believing that no one man can rule with unchecked power is, in his own words, wrong. He thought Lincoln was evil because of how much he abused the Constitution and Executive Branch to defeat the rebellion. I have my personal issues with this as well, but I would argue defeating a treasonous slave state warrants some extreme measures. Acton believed that in the case of the southern rebellion, taking measures to stop this evil Northern dictator were considered morally just. So much so that Acton wanted the government to support them in their war, going so far and calling for troops to be sent in from Canada to invade the North.

He may have hated slavery, but he also believed that forcibly emancipating the slaves was evil. British lives would have been lost to defend an institution he argued against if he got his way.

Now I have to ask: what if Jefferson Davis created a forcibly-conscripted slave army and had them fight the North in place of the white Southerners that made up the Confederate Army? Or what if he began abusing his own executive powers to win the war? Or what if Robert E. Lee, the personal hero of Lord Acton in the conflict, had waged brutal total war on the North, burning and raping and pillaging in such a way that even General Sherman would have found disturbing? Would the South still be the morally superior force if they did whatever it took to continue to be the plucky underdog fighting the big bad dictator that could easily sweep the floor with them? Would the pro-life Catholic Church look upon them as the good guys for supporting a country that did a reversal of Sherman’s March to the Sea.

At what point does having near-absolute power end and complete and utter absolute power begin? Who does Lord Acton lobby for in Parliament when both sides are equally horrible?

How does a man who is morally opposed to slavery willingly support a pro-slavery nation while also saying it would be wrong to forcibly take their slaves away while also saying that same government should get rid of the slaves peacefully? And what would have happened if the South was on the verge of making a comeback or had outright won the war and Jefferson Davis had stepped in and said that they need to end slavery to keep up good relations with Europe and the slave owners told him to fuck off? Would Robert E. Lee being sent in by a Confederate President to subdue the slave owners and free the slaves be as bad as Lincoln wanting to emancipate the slaves? By Acton’s own logic, yes. And *then* I have to ask who would Acton support when the slave owners rebel against a slave owning President?



Jesus Christ, I hate this guy so much. How can you have such conflicting opinions and still believe you are in the right?

Imagine it a bit like this...

Say you are a good old American politician lobbying for a tax on junk food to support healthy eating among poorer people. You also vote to decrease subsidies on farms to curb government spending, raising the prices of healthy foods. You *also* think Michelle Obama's endeavor to remove unhealthy foods from public schools as horrendous government overreach and fight for junk food to be put back in schools. You *also* believe that a free school lunch policy is textbook communism and kids should not be able to eat if they do not have lunch money and do not or cannot bring a lunch from home.

Congratulations!

You have managed to make it impossible for poor people to eat because you raised the prices on both healthy *and* junk food, and you also are forcing financially unstable parents to buy this overpriced food or risk their children starving to death or being taken away by Child Services. I suppose you got your wish of kids eating less because now they are unable to eat anything at all. But spending government money on financial aid programs for these peasants is *communism* and is therefore un-American and you would never support it. Kindly take your place on the tour bus heading down the Hypocrite Highway because you are a morally corrupt douchebag. You can expect Lord Acton to be the stinking gorilla sitting beside you on your road trip.

The whole thing reminds me of the Jaime Lannister quote from George R.R. Martin's book, *A Clash of Kings*. Though not particularly a fan of the books nor the show, I like to reference a specific quote whenever discussing the hypocrisy of man with people online. It is probably the most damning statement on blind loyalty, religion, and unchecked allegiances I have ever read in my entire life and made me give the whole series a read.

*"So many vows... they make you swear and swear. Defend the king. Obey the king. Keep his secrets. Do his bidding. Your life for his. But obey your father. Love your sister. Protect the innocent. Defend the weak. Respect the gods. Obey the laws. It's too much. No matter what you do, you're forsaking one vow or the other."*

There are always a thousand thousand variables to every situation. Even on the issue of preserving the Union, in Lincoln's case, there is a difference between implementing a draft that forces people to fight and die for their country and suspending *habeas corpus* to imprison political prisoners without a jury trial, something guaranteed to us by the United States Constitution.

Again, I have very mixed feelings on the issue of Lincoln's overreach while serving as President but, unlike Acton, I believe the right side of the war won for the right reasons. The execution of Reconstruction was horrible, not trying and executing the leaders of the Confederacy for treason was a mistake, and I would not hesitate to piss on Andrew Johnson's grave if given the chance, but I could rant on that matter for hours on end.

Do I believe that the American government, especially the Presidency, has too much power? Yes, absolutely. There needs to be more involvement by the people to keep politicians in line and not run the government like a boys' club that serves to enrich them at our expense. But do I believe that *everyone* involved in the boys' club known as American politics end up becoming corrupted by power? No, I do not.

At the same time, the government is so spineless and doesn't do anywhere near enough to protect its people. We live in a world where Twitter Activism takes the place of actual mobilizing and both ends of the political spectrum are reduced to shouting matches instead of actually doing anything. The rich

want us fat and lazy so then nothing ever happens to check their power. The only thing preventing 80 year old men from making decisions for my body are a bunch of crying babies on a website with a blue checkmark beside their account name that claim they are socialists but probably haven't read a word of Marx in their lives. We live in a world where people debate whether it's ethical to bully billionaires who want to send gay and trans kids to camps to either cure 'em or kill 'em.

Lord Acton might have an issue with it, but he's dead. Fuck Lord Acton.

Some people have the strength to stand up to those that would oppress them. They would fight for a better way. A just way. Even if they find themselves in a position of having unchecked, absolute power and everyone around them serves at their command, there is no rule saying they must forget themselves and become the villains. Not everyone becomes a mustache-twirling super villain because they get little influence over other people. There are good people in the world and they would do amazing things in government if given the chance. Ones who do not have morally conflicting views on the world and support the bad guys. Ones who do not line their own pockets with "donations" and let children starve.

There just needs to be more oversight into who we elect, how they behave, and what they do while in office. It's up to us to make sure absolute power doesn't corrupt absolutely.

I finally exhaled when it was over. I hate public speaking.

## Lauren

When Beth asked me to come over to her place and listen to the rough draft of the speech she had to give for History class, I wasn't expecting her to go on such a massive tangent about power and the ethics of the church and British politics. Beth said she'd help me write the stupid thing. I was too busy worrying to bother practicing the stupid thing. I figured I'd just wing it. It's not like we haven't been learning about the Civil War since the third grade or anything.

Besides, who can do homework after all the shit we've had to go through?

"Hello?" She waved her hand in my face, waking me from my trance. "You listening?"

"Sorry. Yeah, sorry, go ahead."

I sat there for almost ten minutes while she read off of her paper with perfect poise and stature with a voice as smooth as melted butter. I hadn't even written my paper yet, something I was regretting but recent events made it so hard to sit down and focus on a dumb history essay. And here's Beth with some of the best public speaking I'd ever seen. She said she hates public speaking, but she's amazing at it. I could tell just how much she really cared about this stuff.

She should have been the one who was elected President. Not me.

There were two things I wasn't super sure about: her going into such a tangent about the Church and her tangent going after the South. The Southern part is pretty self-explanatory. I'm not going to disagree with her on this issue. Slavery was fucked. But we live in Texas and there are a lot of old racist assholes around here who would be really pissed to know she was calling out their forefathers and saying that they were the bad guys for getting rich off the backs of enslaved people of color for hundreds of years.

After a little discussion over how much criticism of the South was "too much," she agreed to cut back on the criticism somewhat. But she was adamant that she mention the Confederate Constitution because it was, in her own words, "Readily available for anyone that wants to argue it was really over anything else but slavery."

I was also kinda worried that she might get in trouble for going after papal infallibility and all that. I didn't know a lot of the stuff about it that she talked about, and I'm guessing most of the people in class don't care either. My argument was that talking about it wasn't the issue, but making it out like the Pope was the bad guy would make her look bad.

"Why?" she asked. "It's not like it isn't wrong or anything."

"I'm just saying," I said. "I don't want you to get in trouble."

"If they try to get me in trouble for *that*, I'll just talk to Ashley's mom. I'm sure she'd love to have something to go after them for after everything that's happened."

That was when I remembered one line she said towards the end that made me uncomfortable. Out of everything she was talking about saying in her presentation, this was the only thing I actually had a personal stake in.

"Yeah, speaking of her and... you know, everything..." I began, dreading how she'd respond. "I just think that *maybe* you should cut back on the discussion of um... gay and trans people being... you know... sent to death camps?"

"Am I wrong, though?"

"Well, no—"

"Laur, there's people out there that would *kill us* if they knew who we really were. There's sixty year old psychopaths who would take us out into the woods, put guns to our heads, rape us, and shoot us

for the crime of *existing*. They're trying to bring back Jim Crow laws and keep lynchings from being federal offenses. Why can't I say something? If I don't, who will?"

It made me sick to admit she was right. The world is so fucked.

"It's not about that, it's..." I sighed. "Look, I'm really worried about people getting the wrong idea about us if you say something like that and—"

She frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I groaned and shook my head, frustrated with my inability to speak. I hated standing up for myself. "It's not *you*. Or us. I'm just..." I exhaled deeply to settle myself down. "I just don't want everyone I know to hate me."

She leaned over and held me gently in her arms. Even though she was half my size, she had this way of making me feel safe. Secure. Wanted. She helped me so much after Ashley and I broke up and I know I had the same effect on her after what happened with Grace. There was this unspoken thanks between us for dragging each other out of the pit we'd thrown ourselves into.

"Nobody is going to hate you."

"But what if they do?" I asked. "What if they find out and they hate us?"

She held me close and wouldn't let go. I didn't want her to. "They might not understand now," she whispered, "and some of them may never understand, but that doesn't mean there won't be people who *will* later. They'll see us and wish they were us. They'll see two people who are happier than they've ever been and feel like shit because they don't have what we do."

She kissed me on the cheek and all my fears seemed to wash away. That's all it took.

"I'll never leave you."

"I'll never leave you either."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

## Beth

I had so much more I wanted to say. That was my one chance to speak up and tell the world to go fuck itself for being so heartless and cold. If there was ever going to be change and acceptance for people like me, it starts with young people. If I don't tell them just how fucked up everything is, nothing changes when it's our turn to run things. My generation is the most accepting in the history of the United States, maybe even the whole world, but it's still not enough.

Until I can stand up on stage holding hands with my girlfriend and not fear being humiliated by the biggest pieces of rancid shit that ever existed, it'll never be enough.

Lauren had such a good heart. She was always looking out for me and not just in regards to the content of the presentation. I can get carried away with being so upset over the smallest issues and she was always there to ground me. She was my own personal lightning rod. These last few months have been some of the best of my life. Me and her against the world. She made things so much better while I was dealing with everything, especially as Homecoming got closer and closer. I didn't want to go, but I wasn't leaving her home alone.

The only month worse for me was going to be May. I'll never be able to smile during May again.

I was so worried about how she would handle being considered my "rebound" after everything that went down. To my surprise, she really didn't seem to mind all that much. I guess this was because I could also be considered her "rebound" after her breakup with Ashley. They had only been broken up for a little bit before she and I hooked up. It was the same thing for me, but we never talk about that. I think she was afraid of what I had to say.

She completes me. She is sweet and caring and strong and independent, not to mention drop-dead gorgeous and smarter than most of the school.

This is why I believed without a shadow of a doubt that Lauren Bradshaw was going to do well as the new Student Body President of Arlington City High School. She is *good*. She would never let the power go to her head. Lord Acton could meet her and eat his fucking heart out. She would give all the money she had in her wallet to the lonely kid who got his lunch money stolen from out of his locker by one of the self-entitled popular girls and never expect to be repaid. She was different from that moron Spencer and his equally pathetic mentor Charles. Things will be different than they were under the yoke of the popular assholes who only sought to look out for each other and make everyone else look like fools.

Being by her side made me more proud than anything I have ever done before in my life. We were going to do great things together. Side-by-side. A united front. Me and her against the world for the rest of our lives. Just as it was meant to be. It was our destiny.

I just know it.

## Ashley

The presentation was discussing what was going on around the world before and during the Civil War and how other countries reacted to it. Some people talked about the smuggling they did to get supplies past the Union blockade, others talked about how Canada became a final stop for escaped slaves running from the slave catchers on the Underground Railroad. Mine was supposed to be on how the Confederates wanted to invade Cuba and turn it into a slave state, but with everything going on I was allowed to have an extension and give the presentation a few days later. My History teacher was really cool about it. It was a little kindness and I desperately needed it.

Beth comes out and gives this massive speech on the ethics of a British politician trying to influence Parliament into invading the Union on behalf of the Confederates to help them win the war. Obviously I'd heard the *absolute power* line before, but I didn't know the history of it. Credit to her for actually looking into the story behind it.

What really impressed me, though, was how confident she was in her speech. She had no problems taking shots at the Confederacy, something that can really step on some fingers depending on who you talk to around here, and she had no issues standing up for women's rights and trans people and bashing asshole politicians who want them dead. I could tell our teacher was really uncomfortable with the whole thing. Gotta give her props for not caring who she pissed off.

She basically said everything I had ever said online with a username protecting my identity or in private with people I trusted (which means Lauren and Michelle.) I used to be terrified of talking politics with my friends, who could not give a shit, because I know a lot of their parents actually *did*. I didn't want to lose my friends because their parents disagreed with my political views, which basically translate to not being an asshole to women, people in the community, or minorities. That's basically the only reason why I never come out to any of my closest friends. Not even Michelle.

I knew she'd probably get flak for saying it, but I did respect her for doing it at all.

## Kate

When everything was said and done, I wasn't shocked that Lauren became the President. Or even mad. It was the last thing anyone was talking about when the last bell rang. I felt kinda bad for Lauren because that should have been her moment. Nobody was talking about it, though.

I heard the rumors about a blowup between Spencer and O'Reilly around the same time as everyone else. Everybody was laughing about it, everybody was speculating on it. It basically ruined his reputation around school. Whatever was left of it, anyway.

It supposedly was about the fight at the football game and him accusing Brad of being a rapist. That was the story everyone went with based on a rumor from whoever was working as the student assistant in the front office that day. I think it was Jenny Schultz?

Somebody claimed they saw Ashley and Spencer together in the parking lot. Whoever was out there soon told everyone and for the second time that day, Ashley was left as the center of attention. Ashley didn't want to talk about it so we didn't learn much except that Spencer ran off and she tried to stop him. I couldn't blame her for wanting to keep it private.

In a perfect world, the guy who got beat up for attacking a would-be rapist would be treated like a hero and all but be handed the Presidency because he deserved it for standing up for Ashley. This is not a perfect world and nobody had seen Spencer in days.

Lauren acted surprised when she was declared the winner, though I wonder if this was a facade and she was just playing up the excitement for the people around her. Beth was convinced that Lauren would win and she was right. She told me that Lauren was extremely hesitant to even consider running when the idea came up over the summer, but I think she was just being modest and trying to make her girlfriend look humble.

It's Lauren Bradshaw. She had just as much of a chance of winning as Spencer did.

Was I still upset that I dropped out? A little. But things weren't all bad, I guess. Lauren followed through with her promise to bring me into her Cabinet when we talked after school was done for the day. So, at the very least, I could say I would at least be able to put *something* on my college apps. And I figured I could always try again if Lauren didn't want to do it Senior Year or maybe she would even be okay with some friendly competition. The last thing I wanted to do was drive a wedge between our new friendship after it only just begun so I wouldn't dream of asking her that so soon, especially since she'd only just won. But I would think about it.

Lauren, Beth, Michelle, Casey, Heather, and myself ended up going out to dinner after school was over. Ashley was still really worked up over Spencer storming out and needed a break. I was the fish out of water. All of those people were cool and popular and had a lot of friends and played sports and stuff. Even Beth, who was a bit of a loner, was more popular here than I ever was just because she was secretly dating Lauren and got to hang out with her crowd as a plus-one. I tried to stay quiet for most of the night just to not embarrass myself.

"I still can't believe I won," Michelle humble bragged between bites of her chicken salad.

"You totally deserved it!" Lauren said sweetly. "If anyone else won, I'd probably just quit. You are *literally* the only one I'd work with. Ahh, this is going to be so much fun!"

Michelle was so happy to be working with her bestie. I don't know how she felt about Spencer and his crew of football players, but I can't imagine she would like being stuck with them for a half-hour every couple of days while they talk about guy stuff, even if she was dating one. Ashley told me stories of how they ran things during Sophomore year and it seemed like a nightmare. Now there were only a

handful of athletes in the club and I figured Lauren and Beth could keep them in line. Not that Tom needs to be checked, though. He seemed really cool. Casey had been dating him for a year and said he was amazing.

“He’s taking me to his grandma’s house to meet her this Sunday,” she gushed. Everyone *oohed* and *awed* in unanimous support for her. I caught Beth’s gaze and she gave a little eye-roll at how silly it was. I smiled.

“Does anyone know the Freshmen who won?” Lauren asked.

“Natasha *Lopez*,” Heather answered with annoyance. “My sister says she’s a total bitch. She’s a year older than her and she said she treated people like garbage back in middle school.”

“Maybe she’s grown up a little?” Lauren offered. Heather shrugged.

“I’m more worried about having a basketball player and a football player together,” Beth said. “We all know what’s going to happen this year. There’s a big Anniversary this year.”

“Has it really been fifteen years?” Casey asked.

Beth nodded her head. “And I *guarantee* something is going to go down.”

“What is it with them?” Casey asked, annoyed. “Why do they have to make such a big deal over this *every. Single. Year?*”

Lauren smiled. “We can worry about that at the meeting tomorrow. For now, let’s just relax and enjoy our win.”

I still couldn’t stop thinking about Tracy and what we almost did. If they didn’t back out of the race, Lauren and Beth would have been the laughing stock of the entire school while everyone shared their pictures around behind their backs. They might have needed to change schools, maybe even move to different states. If I had listened to her, I might have been the one having the celebration dinner.

*Just me and Tracy and...*



## **Beth**

From what I gathered after talking to some people online, other high schools would simply have elections to determine who would get the other Cabinet positions and the President would be stuck with complete strangers and wildcards for their subordinates. People would run for Secretary, Treasurer, and whatever else and that was that. Anyone who had no chance at becoming President would run for that and then get to party with the cool kids a couple times a week. I think it was like that back home, but I was too busy keeping my head down to pay attention to that stuff.

We were extremely fortunate to not have that inconvenience. Without it, we were allowed to recruit our own people to the jobs. This ensured a tight leash and some existing trust between the members. That was extremely important. Who would dare rock the boat and risk ruining a friendship by saying no to the people who gave them the job in the first place?

After having actually given the jobs away, I can see why actual politicians become such sellouts. They are given an inch and expect a mile in return.

This was why I made it my highest priority to convince Lauren to let me choose who I believed would be best suited for the Cabinet. I had a much sharper mind for diplomacy and politics and felt it was better to maintain total control over the situation. Lauren's friends aren't all the worst, namely Michelle, but she has a long way to go in terms of learning who she should associate herself with. Too many people in her life drag her down and hold her back from being the strong independent woman I fell in love with. She needed me to help sort the wheat from the chaff.

She agreed to let me make the decision for her on the condition that I bought her a box of donuts. I love that woman.

When it came down to deciding who would fill what positions from our list of allies, we decided to bring in friends and allies as well as people with political ties that we could exploit, which in the high school world translates to people with ties to the most important clubs, cliques, and teams. Having a couple of athletes win their elections as well as the likes of Victoria Falco, Jasmine Jackson, and Michelle Wilson, all very popular and intelligent girls with their own little groups of followers, saved us the need to go out and recruit them ourselves.

I took it upon myself to bring in the best and brightest for my girlfriend's administration. Hours spent combing through the school's website, old year books, and Facebook and Instagram pages to remember people I had forgotten and be introduced to people I had never met. In the end, I think I found a strong collective. The Avengers of Arlington. A true think tank made up of the finest untapped potential I could find among this cesspit of hormones and body spray.

## **Lauren Bradshaw's Cabinet** **(Rough Draft)**

President: Lauren

Vice President: Myself (because who else would it be?)

Secretary: Katherine

Treasurer: X

Historian: Casey

Student Activities Advisor: Y

## Student-Faculty Liaison: Z

*Yeah, I didn't actually need to put much thought into this. That was a lie.*

This was not exactly the Tammany Hall of highschool politics and I never expected it to be. There were jobs that needed doing and asses that needed kissed to keep people on Lauren's side and these were the ones that required the least amount of effort. If I wanted people who would give the "jobs" to the level of respect they deserved, I'd probably have been better off picking up the homeless guy under the bridge.

I had to make concessions in the name of actually getting things done. Also I remembered halfway through an all-nighter that I don't actually know ninety percent of the student body and of those ninety percent, eighty wouldn't actually say yes to a stranger asking them to sacrifice their days off working on dances and food drives. Of the ones that actually would say yes, most of them would only do it to either try to leech off of Lauren's popularity or try to weasel their way in between us.

*Ah, well.*

The bright side is most of these positions carry absolutely no responsibility. Without even setting foot in the Student Council Office, I knew the role of "Historian" was pointless. It was just another position added to give someone a morale boost and college application bonus. It was more or less the exact same thing as Secretary, a job we had already given to Katherine as a useless thank you for stopping Tracy, and really was expendable in the grand scheme of things. That was the only reason I gave the job to a total airhead Casey. She was dating Tom and I wanted to ensure his loyalty. I knew tensions would arise between him and Alex Weatherspoon, the basketball playing Sophomore Rep, so gaining Tom's support early on was vital.

Two votes are better than one, after all.

I considered adding Heather as well to ensure three votes, a move that would have been even more of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the legitimacy of our administration than pretty much anyone else in the entire school, but she thankfully declined because she said she needed to work on her SAT prep and focus on school. I almost snorted in her face at the thought of her in anything besides clown college. It was too funny of a concept for me to wrap my head around.

Tracy becoming a toxic growth in the eyes of my friend group made it all but impossible to secure her a spot, something I had intended from the beginning as she still owed me for not burying her like the little worm she was. Losing her was unfortunate, but you reap what you sow. She may hate me with a passion for standing up to her, but I was entirely justified. Hurting poor sweet Katherine was just cruel.

After dealing with the most useless of jobs, I decided to seek out special permission from Mr. Hardy to add two new positions to the Cabinet. In reality, I needed an excuse to get two more people in that I could trust. I met with him during my study hall the next day to discuss the matter. I spent all night coming up with an argument for each position I wished to create and what their role would be.

I cited the failure of the previous administration to prevent the incident at Prom as an utmost concern for more student-teacher correspondence, hence the creation of the "Student Activity Advisor" position. A position that I, as Vice President, would personally maintain oversight over. This person would be in charge of all dances, food drives, assemblies, etc. and they would meet with either Mr. Hardy or Mr. O'Reilly if needed to discuss details and plans on behalf of or alongside the President.

It really was just a formality as we already had a Homecoming, Snow Ball, and Prom Committee that consisted of multiple Class Representatives working together. This new position would serve as their immediate boss and prevented me and Lauren from needing to waste time deciding which streamers to

hang up. It was all thankless busywork that nobody really wanted to do. All people cared about when it came to dances was hanging out with their significant other in public, getting drunk or high at a party, and maybe getting laid if they aren't with total prudes.

Most importantly and above all else, though, we had someone to blame if things went horribly wrong.

With regards to the newly created position of "Student-Faculty Liaison," I argued that recent events between the student body and the school required there to be more transparency between the kids and the adults. Citing the suicide of Grace Carlisle, I explained to Mr. Hardy that we needed to have someone who could speak to staff or administration on behalf of the student body if something of this nature ever came up again. Someone who could speak about big issues on behalf of other students and find out what would be done to help them. Someone both the administration *and* the student body at large could trust. A sort of ambassador-type.

Everyone knew Mr. Hardy was hurt by the death of one of his students and wasted no time accepting my proposal. He kept a small photo of her in the corner of his "Wall of Memories," a large collage of pictures stapled to a massive bulletin board beside his whiteboard at the front of the room. It was nice to know she was still remembered.

Mr. Hardy generously approved my request and I was left with two additional jobs to fill alongside the position of Treasurer, which I had plans for that would require time and patience. After careful consideration, I came to the conclusion that Ashley was the best choice to serve in the role of Student Activity Advisor and sought her out during that same study hall period to ask her to join us.

Ashley looked like a wreck. Sure she was absolutely beautiful and all, but she looked like she aged twenty years in the span of a few weeks. The accident must have been keeping her up at night. Add in her drug habit and you could plainly see she was going off the rails.

"Why would you want me?" she asked me with great suspicion. I could not blame her for distrusting me. It was not like we hated each other or anything.

"Okay, she didn't want me to say anything, but Lauren is *really* worried about you right now." I took a step closer. She didn't back away. "I am, too."

I knew mentioning her beloved ex by name would soften her up just a bit and see reason. As predicted, she took the bait.

"Why?"

"After everything that happened and after we swore we would help you out and protect you, why do you think she wouldn't want to be there for you? Especially now after what happened to Spencer. Do you think she just wants to hurt you or something?"

Ashley was at a loss for words. Now was the time to go in for the kill.

"She still loves you, you know," I said, the admission stinging like one of those Japanese Murder Hornets. "As much as it pains me to admit it, I know she does. She worries about you all the time. I know it would mean a lot if you would be with her a little more often. She never told me about what happened between you two, but I can tell she wants to work things out. She really wants you to be okay, Ash."

Ashley's resolve was crushed. She had no fight left in her. The prospect of being loved is a cruel one, especially when it is by someone you already convinced yourself you would die for. All it took was one whiff of the concept of being desired and she was mine.

"I'll be there."

**Lauren Bradshaw's Cabinet**  
**(Version 1.0)**

President: Lauren  
Vice President: Myself  
Secretary: Katherine  
Treasurer: X  
Historian: Casey  
Student Activities Advisor: Ashley  
Student-Faculty Liaison: Z

With Ashley's loyalty and commitment to our cause ensured, I only had two more jobs to fill and our own little Small Council would be complete. That would be a matter for later, though. When the end of the day came, it was time for our first meeting of Student Council.

## Ashley

I was in a rut. Weeks of being beaten down and having worse and worse things happen to me were finally starting to get to me. Like *really* get to me. I was waking up every twenty minutes at night, I couldn't focus on homework, I was ready to quit the cheerleading squad which would basically doom me to a life of sitting alone at lunch...

I was a mess. I knew I needed help, but I didn't know where to go.

Having no real friends sucks. Casey and Heather are sweet, but they can't have a serious conversation to save their lives. It was all boys and clothes and TV. Losing Michelle was killing me. She was the only real person I could confide in about anything, except maybe Lauren. I knew deep down that if I talked with her about why Lauren and I stopped being friends, she would understand. Hell, she'd probably go out of her way to try and set us up again. She was so cool like that. I couldn't bring myself to tell her. I was too scared.

Therapy was not an option either.

If I wanted to see a therapist, I'd need to talk to my mom since it was her insurance I'd be getting it through. If I talked to my Mom, she'd want to know *everything* before ever taking me to a session to see what she could do. Lauren, Brad, almost hooking up with Jason, my drug use.

Spencer...

Even though she loves me, I'd need a real reason to actually justify going to therapy versus just sitting down and talking with her. What did I have to be upset about that she couldn't just fix herself? She isn't a hover parent, but she would rather shoulder all of the burden. That's just how it's been since Dad left. It's not my fault I had nightmares for years about her and Dad getting divorced and now all of a sudden those nightmares are coming true.

I'm trapped in that pit inside my head that I can't crawl out of as my family is ripped apart. Alone. Suffering in silence. I felt like some edgy asshole from Tumblr or Holden Caulfield from *Catcher in the Rye*. Just me against the world because the world kept trying to fuck me over and I was too scared to do anything about it.

I was wasting away a little more every day. I'd wake up in the morning before the alarm went off and just stare at the ceiling, remembering that I had to do another day. Part of me wished I could just die in my sleep. Go to bed and never wake up and have it be no fault of my own. I wouldn't need to be the one to do it and no one would think less of me for it. Hell, they'd probably see me as a martyr. They'd raid my room to find keepsakes that they could flaunt around like the scrunchie from *Heathers* as a token of just how much people loved me and missed me. The dumb fanfiction I wrote when I was a pimply eighth grader would be discovered and I'd be lauded as the second coming of Steinbeck who never knew her true potential. PDFs of the stories would go for thousands of dollars online. At least I'd have left *something* behind for people to remember me by.

*Fuck, I'm such a narcissist.*

Thinking about people actually caring about me in death made me hate myself more in life. I felt like an attention whore for wanting to be seen. Selfish. You got people starving in Africa and suicide nets outside of factories in China and here I am sitting alone in the cafeteria in a suburban Texas high school during study hall wishing I could be anywhere else in the world. Why did I deserve to live in a country with plenty of food and shelter and be pretty and white and have everything handed to me since I was a baby? You've got cops killing people in the streets and trans people fighting for their right to exist and the

Supreme Court about to take away access to legalized abortion and ban gay marriage and I get to go home and watch TV and eat ice cream and forget about life while the world burns outside my window.

*What did I ever do to deserve to be happy?*

At first, I honestly thought Beth was kidding when she asked me to join Student Council. I was minding my own business in study hall when she walked up to me and asked if we could talk. As much as I wanted to get my homework done before I went to the hospital, I just couldn't focus. She'd actually been kinda nice to me lately, another thing I didn't deserve after how badly I treated her last year. Letting her talk to me was the least I could do to repay her for putting up with me for no reason. I wasn't expecting her to give me a job offer.

"Lauren and I were wondering if you wanted to work with us and be on her Cabinet?" she asked with a sweet smile on her face.

I almost laughed in her face.

Again, I thought she was kidding and this was just another way of her fucking with me to get some of her dignity back after so much abuse. She really had grown a backbone since she first started here so I wouldn't put it past her.

"Why do you want *me*?"

When she told me that Lauren was still in love with me and wanted to work with me, I realized she was serious. It hurt to hear that she was so worried about me. Lauren and I had been broken up for months. She shouldn't still be worrying about me. She doesn't have a responsibility to look after me. It was just another thing that made me feel like shit about myself.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked. She gave me a quick rundown. Even though I felt obligated to help them after all they'd done for me, I had to set some ground rules. "Just to be clear, I'm not doing all of your work for you like I did for the guys. I have too much going on to be someone else's butler."

She smiled. "I promise you won't be stuck doing *everything* for us. Kate will be there to help. And I'm working to get some of the best people I can find to work with us."

"And *I'm* one of the best?"

"You said it yourself, you did pretty much all of the work for Spencer when you were working for him. Wouldn't you like to at least get credit for what you do? The job I had in mind would be perfect for you and unlike before, you'd have people working *for you* instead of... whatever was going on before. And besides, I think the distraction would be good for you."

She went on to explain that she was creating an entirely new job called the "Student Activity Advisor" and it was pretty much everything it sounds like. I would be in charge of organizing school events with multiple people working for me. Instead of doing all of the work alone or being paired with people who weren't interested in actually working at all, I'd have people answering to me and listening to what I asked them to do or else they'd have to answer to Lauren and Beth. More work for more individual recognition.

I have to admit, it was pretty tempting. And not just because I would be spending time with Lauren again.

Besides myself, Tracy was the only one who actually did anything in the group last year. Hell, she probably even did *more* than I did. I asked if she would be able to get a job to help me out, but Beth quickly shut that idea down.

"Let's just say that she wouldn't be a good fit with some of the people in the group."

I had an idea of who she meant and why they wouldn't work well together. I hoped Kate was doing okay. We hadn't talked much lately. I wondered when she found out what Spencer asked Tracy to do. I felt partially responsible for what happened. I could have forced Spencer to call it off, but I didn't. I was too angry and wanted to get away from everyone, especially him. It was one of many instances of me fucking up and it coming back around to hurt someone else.

She then told me some of the people I would be working with. It was nice to hear that she was giving Casey a spot. I wished Heather was available to help, but sadly her grandma was really sick and she wanted to spend more time with her while she's still here. I can't blame her for not wanting another thing to worry about. Casey and I would be more than capable of organizing Homecoming together, though.

"I'm in," I finally said firmly. "I'll see you later."

I was very curious who the last two people she wanted to recruit would be. I had a few ideas in mind, but Beth said she would take care of it so I kept my mouth shut. I was still processing that I was going to be back on Student Council again. It sucked that Spencer wouldn't be there, though. As much as he pissed me off sometimes. I just hoped he was okay...

It was going to be nice to spend more time with some of my friends. Kate, Michelle, Casey... and Lauren and Beth. I still felt like I was on shaky ground after everything that went down over the past year. Especially with Beth, who I knew still hated my guts even though she'd been making an effort to at least be cordial with me for Lauren's sake.

But if she was really trying to look past that and let bygones be bygones...

That was when I realized that this was a sign. A sign from the universe that was saying that I could make things right and be a better person. I was sick of feeling guilty for being such an asshole before and sick of feeling lost and confused and sad and like my life had no meaning. This wasn't going to become some big scheme to try and win Lauren back or anything. I realized this was my one chance to make myself a better person in the eyes of the people that go to this school. The same people who mocked me for being nothing but a bitch and a brat and a junkie behind my back when they thought I couldn't hear them. The ones I tried to impress by kissing Kara Alderman's ass for a whole year. The ones I would think about while lying awake at night ten years later while remembering how much of an ass I was, wondering if they remember.

If there was ever a chance to mend fences and become a good person, someone that could reflect on their day as they're trying to fall asleep and not feel like a total waste of life, this was it. And I was going to take it.

## Beth

I was the first one in the room. It was my job to be sure everything was perfect for her.

Hell, I nearly sprinted out of my Economics class when the announcement for the members of Student Council to make their way to the room for the “swearing in ceremony” that we were supposed to do. My spot at the front of the classroom gave me a perfect route straight to the door. I managed to almost run down multiple people in my near-sprint to my locker. I gathered everything I felt I would need, triple-checking to make sure that I did not forget anything, before making my way to the office.

It was like a walk of glory. Every step made me feel more powerful. Nothing in the world could tear me down. All of my hard work— all of *our* hard work— finally paying off. Even though I was just Lauren’s skinny little sidekick that nobody talked to, no one could say I did not actually matter around this school anymore. It felt amazing to finally be recognized, to be seen. No longer would I be “that girl who follows Lauren around everywhere that doesn’t have any other friends” or “that girl who hung out with Grace a lot before she killed herself.”

Even if no one gave me a shred of respect or even a single acknowledgement after my hand in Lauren’s victory, I knew my own worth. Everyone else would soon enough. I would make damn sure of it.

Apparently Lauren had the same excitement that I did because when I entered the office, I found Lauren doing a slow walk around the room, taking everything in. I watched her from the door frame, smiling to myself. It felt so good seeing her realize her true worth, what she was capable of. What I saw every time I laid eyes on her.

I finally found the courage to speak up and make my presence known when she approached the podium at the front of the room. “Makes you feel really official, doesn’t it?”

She jumped a little, not expecting me to be there so early. She quickly calmed down and smiled back at me, sharing my level of happiness. “Yeah. Yeah, it does. You know it was all because of you that I won at all, right?”

I entered the room and approached the podium. The wood was a bright yellowish color. It felt extremely smooth when I ran my hand over it. Years of people wearing it down with their own Student Council meetings had sanded it down so it was as sleek as glass. It did make me feel official, even if I would almost never be standing behind it. That was Lauren’s job.

“That’s not true,” I said coyly. “I mean, not entirely.”

“Oh, come on, you know it was all you,” she playfully responded.

“You did it all yourself,” I promised as I took a step closer to her. “You’re kind and smart and hotter than the fucking Sun.” I reached out and brushed a strand of hair that was obstructing her face, her utterly flawless skin that other girls would kill to have. “Everyone around here *loves you* and they *want you* to lead them. You know that.”

I made sure to leave out the part about how Spencer ruined his social life and destroyed his chances at actually winning by getting himself thrown out of the race for fighting with both Brad and O’Reilly in the span of a week. It did not exactly seem tasteful in light of recent events. Everyone found out about what happened to him that morning and people were already organizing trips to the hospital to check on him. It really is funny how people forget what bad things you do when tragedy strikes.

Lauren leaned in and kissed me. I cupped her cheek and brushed my thumb beneath her eye, savoring the moment. Someone would be entering this room in a moment and we did not get a chance to celebrate her victory the day before. Lauren had to go to dinner with her grandparents and was sadly



unavailable to spend quality time with her Vice President. It sucked to be alone, but I survived. We had plans for the weekend anyway.

When we pulled away, she realized the door was wide open and we laughed to ourselves with embarrassment. Despite nearly being the victim of a poorly thought out revenge porn scheme, we still could not keep our hands off of each other around here. Selfish me needed some quality time with my girlfriend. Foolish, but worth it. If everyone else could have public displays of affection, why couldn't we? It wasn't fair. It was bullshit. Why couldn't I show everyone how much I loved her, but every teacher could gossip about Spencer and Ashley when they become a couple? This was on the top of my list of goals for her administration: build a more open and accepting school system. We would work the kinks out later.

"We should probably stop now," Lauren blushed. "I don't want that nerdy kid Tyler or whatever his name is getting a free show."

"We could put a donation box outside," I offered. "Like a national park."

She gave a playful push to my shoulders and we began preparing for the first official meeting of Lauren Bradshaw's Student Council.

Mr. O'Reilly and Mr. Hardy arrived soon after, followed by every one of the people who would be serving on Student Council, both elected and appointed by myself and Lauren. They wished us all well in our coming term, gave a little extremely rehearsed speech about the glories of democracy and some other flag-waving bullshit, and then had us each say a little pledge to uphold the values of the office and so on.

I was glad we got to go first. It gave me more time to stare at Lauren while everyone else wasn't looking. She caught me and we got to share a secret smile only we understood. I loved her so much.

## Lauren

Before I could register what was happening, Beth was kissing me.

Any other time, I wouldn't have minded. She's my girlfriend and I love her. But the door was wide open and after what happened with that little witch Tracy, I was dreading the thought of being caught again. I'd been having actual nightmares of everyone in school seeing the pictures Tracy took and ending up like Victoria. As nice as Victoria can be, she was the laughing stock of the school after her nudes got leaked last year. The thought of that happened to me made my chest tighten up. I don't know if it's panic attacks or stress or overreacting or what, but I'd been a nervous wreck ever since Kate confided in us what was going on.

I let the kiss happen because I didn't want to hurt Beth's feelings, but I had to say *something* after it was done. I nervously laughed and said, "We should probably stop now. I don't want that nerdy Freshman kid Tyler getting a free show."

We discovered we had this kind of mental connection early on when we started dating. That's a horrible way to describe it, but it's true. It was like we were psychically in sync or something. Whenever I'd get upset, she always seemed to text me shortly after and we'd talk about it. Whenever she got sick with some bad stomach bug, I had a bad dream about her getting sick on a date with me and the first thing I saw when I woke up was a text she sent saying to stay away for a couple days because she was puking her guts out all night and didn't want me getting sick. The weirdest one was when she said she had this really fucked up dream where she watched me drowning in a swimming pool and her legs were, like, frozen in place and she couldn't save me. When she told me, I told her I was at the pool the day before and this kid passed out in the water and needed CPR from the lifeguard.

It's some really spooky shit.

I was hoping that our psychic connection would mix with reading basic social cues and she would understand that I was kidding. I was hoping she'd understand that I was extremely uncomfortable with public displays of affection right now, especially since she and I weren't officially out yet. It's not that I *didn't* want to come out, but the whole thing with Tracy really scared me right back into the closet. Sometimes I feel like I'm the problem and I just need to suck it up and get over myself. I don't know.

She smiled and said, "We could put a donation box outside. Like a national park."

## Kate

I have to say, the whole “swearing in ceremony” was really weird. Like, you see the inauguration every couple of years on TV and it gets drawn out for hours and hours. I remember when Obama got elected back when I was around eight or nine and they funneled us all into the library to watch it. They said it was because it was a big national event and it was historical or whatever and we deserved to see it. Even though Obama was cool and all, it seemed like it was never going to end. Nine year old me doesn’t care about Obama. Nine year old me wants to go outside and play Foursquare or chase butterflies.

Ironically, that was how it felt when you weren’t the one being sworn in. It was just a goofy little ceremony that you only cared about when it was you up in front of an entire room of people. They decided to take everyone and swear them in separately versus just swearing in everyone as a group. I always *loved* being the center of attention so this was no problem for me. Not at all. Nope. No big deal. On the plus side, we got out of class early so I guess it wasn’t all that bad.

First they called up the Class Representatives, then they called up the Cabinet, then Beth as the Vice President, and finally Lauren as President. While O’Reilly’s back was turned, everyone made faces and dirty gestures at the one being sworn in. Lauren was red from trying not to laugh.

After it was done, Mr. O’Reilly talked about how special this club was and how we would all do great things together and make the school proud or whatever. He then asked Lauren to give a little speech to her new friends. Mr. Hardy looked a little annoyed that it was being dragged out for so long, but he stayed quiet. At least he looked like he was getting bored to me anyway. If that was how he really felt, he was speaking for the rest of us. Everyone just wanted to do our thing so we could either go home or get to whatever sport or club we had after this. As excited as I was to be there with all these really cool people, even I didn’t want to endure long speeches and other goofy stuff like that.

Lauren slowly walked up to the podium looking as nervous as a little five year old. I’m glad she didn’t have to do the debate. She probably would have died up there. It was weird thinking about how someone that everyone loved and would gather around to listen to for hours was so afraid to talk in front of people. I could relate, but I also wasn’t popular.

“Um... well, I didn’t exactly have anything special planned to say, but here goes...” She took a breath and composed herself. “Sooooo, everyone, thank you all for being here and I’m so happy for everyone who won their elections! You all deserved it a hundred percent. And for the people who were asked to be here, just know that we chose you for a reason and we think you’ll do great things for what we’re doing here.”

She gave me a little smile as one of the “chosen few.”

“So, uh, yeah! I guess that’s it. Let’s have a good year and have fun!”

There was some applause, started by Beth, that eventually everyone joined in on. It wasn’t exactly JFK’s “We Choose To Go To The Moon” speech, but we all still clapped for her. It was mostly to avoid being *that guy* who didn’t want to support the new President in front of all her friends. Lauren blushed hard at the support and sat down on the throne that rested at the head of the table.

Spencer’s old chair. His throne.

It was really weird not seeing him in it. It kind of became his thing in the aftermath of Charles’ expulsion. Somebody needed to take the reins around here and he got picked because he’s good at football and everyone loves him. I still couldn’t make myself believe that he actually got into that accident. I told myself it was just some stupid rumor and I needed to see him to actually convince myself that he was hurt at all.

“Well, thank you for those words, Ms. Bradshaw,” Mr. O’Reilly said. “I guess we will leave you to it. Any questions, any concerns, come find either myself or Mr. Hardy.”

With that, they left so the kids could run the school. I could tell that Beth was dying for this because as soon as they left, she took command and began running the show. She stepped in with a list of issues that needed to be addressed. It felt like I was watching the “Cabinet Battle” scenes from the Hamilton musical, minus the rap battle portion of it. It would have been very funny to see Beth Hill try to rap. She’s about as gangsta as Vanilla Ice.

## Beth

The most annoying part of the whole “swearing in ceremony” was that our good administration did not think to call it an “inauguration ceremony” like any other election in the world. You win the election, you get sworn in at an inauguration ceremony, and you get to work. What the holy hell is a “swearing in ceremony” and why can you not call it what it is?

They tried to be cute and make it all official by having us swear on a copy of the Student Handbook. I suspect this specific book was chosen not for its thematic significance in how we are meant to be serving the school and the student body who trusted us with this most heavy of burdens and duties, but rather because they would probably receive flak if they made us swear on a copy of the Holy Bible or the Torah or the Quran.

It was probably the first book they saw in the front office. I digress.

After Lauren gave her speech and O'Reilly and Hardy left us to our own devices, I took it upon myself to direct conversation. It was painfully obvious that Lauren was dealing with some public speaking anxiety so I took it upon myself to direct the flow of conversation for her. One of my many duties as her right hand. She deserved a break.

First, I addressed the Class Representatives, the people we would need to convince the most to support us in our endeavors. “So first, congratulations to all the Class Reps for winning your elections! We’re all looking forward to working with you!”

I had rehearsed that line all night and said it with the sweetest smile I could muster. Besides Michelle and maybe Victoria, I really couldn’t give a shit about any of them if I tried.

“We have a lot to discuss and we only have so much time to do it so I think we should get right to work,” I continued. “Is there anything anyone would like to say or ask before we begin?”

The question was more of a formality than anything. Casting a line out into the open sea in the middle of the day in the vain hopes that something would bite. To my surprise, I did get a bite. Its name was Tyler Benjamin, the freshman who won the dodgeball game and quickly became the star of his class.

“So what about a bikini car wash for charity?” Tyler asked with a smarmy look on his face.

This was exactly what I was hoping for. Someone, anyone, to say something stupid or ask a dumb question so they could be made an example of in front of the rest of the group. I was expecting there to be some initial tension between the football and basketball players in the group and that this would be the first case of someone speaking out of turn and ruining our group dynamic. I had not expected it to be a Freshman, but it did not surprise me either. This only solidified my belief that Tyler was nothing more than a pathetic wannabe who was trying to use crude humor to win the admiration of the upperclassmen. His looking around and smiling at the other men in the room, hoping they would smile back, confirmed this.

Immature little shit.

“As much as I know the girls in this room would love to wear revealing clothing to make money for you, I think we are going to have to pass.”

Between my comment and the glares from the other girls, he shut his mouth pretty fast and that stupid grin evaporated like a drop of water on the sidewalk in the middle of August. Stay silent for the rest of the day, the rest of the month, the rest of the year. Whatever. You are doing me a favor.

“Thank you for your idea, though!” I continued, “but this is a school, not a strip club.”

My response to Tyler's blithering stupidity gathered smiles from some of the girls in the room, namely Victoria Falco, Katherine, and Lauren herself. Even Tom chuckled a little at me putting the kid in his place.

Like all democracies where everyone is allowed a voice, people like Tyler are allowed to voice their silly fantasies whenever they want. But because decisions must be made by a group vote, they will get shut down nine out of ten times. You can say whatever you want when you live in a free country, but do not expect everyone else to go along with it and do not be sad when your dumb ideas are universally considered a blatant waste of time and we treat it as such. He can waste our time all he wants. We will watch him use up precious oxygen until the day he dies.

The bell rang, signifying the end of fourth period and the start of the mini-study hall to end the day. Student Council meetings took place during this study hall and we only had those thirty minutes to get work done, but O'Reilly gave us a few extra minutes for the first day. It was the only good thing he has ever done around here. Those brief seconds of listening to the bell ring gave me time to collect my thoughts and return us back to the task at hand.

"Anyways, onto the first issue," I continued. "As you can see, there are a few empty chairs in this room that need filling. Lauren and I have been going back and forth considering people since the election, and we do have a few ideas, but we wanted your input as well. If you know anyone who would be a good fit for the positions of Treasurer or Student-Faculty Liaison, please feel free to name names and we will get back to them."

"Isn't having a Treasurer, like, really important?" Jasmine questioned. "Don't we need someone to deal with the money for Homecoming?"

"It absolutely is," I answered, "but don't worry about it not being filled for now. I told Lauren I would fill in until someone else is formally given the position. It won't be a problem."

That seemed to satisfy Jasmine, who shrugged and sat back in her seat.

"Wait, what is a Student-Faculty... what?" Alex Weatherspoon asked, stumbling over his own words.

"*Student-Faculty Liaison*," I corrected. I went through the process of explaining why I added two new positions to Student Council and what they are meant to do.

My explanation seemed to satisfy Alex as well because he nodded and said, "Okay, yeah, makes sense. I guess." and shut back up. I made sure to sneak glances at Tom while I was speaking to Alex to see how he was taking a basketball player being around him. If he cared even the slightest bit, he did not show it. I wondered if these two had some kind of friendship or previous positive interactions. Perhaps they were lovers.

"And that is why Lauren and I chose Ashley to serve as Student Activities Advisor," I said, hoping to finish this train of thought and move on. "She worked really hard last year for Charles and Spencer and I know she will do the same for us."

Ashley awoke from her depressed haze and sheepishly gave a small wave to the rest of the group. You would think being the most popular girl in school would give you a backbone and a sense of ego that loved to be jerked off when one of your peers compliments you in front of a room of your classmates. I could still remember when she'd shove me into lockers for daring to walk around her and send me nasty messages on Facebook trashing my relationship with Grace and threatening to out me to the entire school. She really has lost her edge, hasn't she?

"Which brings me to our next talking point," I said, giving Lauren a little glance to signal her to continue the conversation.

She realized what I was doing, cleared her throat, and finished flawlessly with, “Homecoming is only a few weeks away and we have a lot to get ready for. We’re going to need everyone ready to pitch in so it goes smoothly. Especially with the fundraiser that is going on this Friday.”

“And that is why we’re looking for anyone with any amount of fundraising experience to become the Treasurer because I’m not a miracle worker and can only do so much right now,” I said with a chuckle.

Being completely honest, I could handle it all with ease and then some. The Treasurer gets a special credit card from O’Reilly and they can spend it on whatever they want as long as a receipt is provided and an explanation as to any purchases made without a teacher’s explicit permission beforehand. Far too much trust in the student body in my humble opinion. For now, I was holding out until I found someone perfect for the job who would do whatever I asked of them without question. I had someone in mind, but getting to them would be difficult. Thankfully I have friends of friends to get me through doors.

“Isn’t it kinda dumb that we start so close to Homecoming when we are the ones who have to organize the whole fuckin’ thing?” Michelle complained.

“It really is dumb,” I said in agreement. We needed more time.

“I heard it was because they didn’t want a repeat of the Prom situation and they wanted us to have less time to screw anything up,” Tom said. Being one of the football players, I’m sure he had some insider information about what punishment the guys who participated in the prank received at the end of the previous school year. How they got away with it, I will never know. I stayed home, though. No date.

“Will we even be able to run the bake sale?” Casey asked.

“If we all chip in and do our share, I’m sure we will pull it off,” I said with a sense of pride, hoping it would rub off on them and inspire them to do their part for the good of the team.

“And if worst comes to worst, just have your mom buy a box of cookies from the store,” Michelle said with a smile that revealed her perfectly white teeth.

We agreed to discuss Homecoming more during future meetings. We would worry about the bake sale when we next met on Thursday. I was hoping to get more than three meetings per week, as we were only scheduled for Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, but Lauren said the fall athletes had to leave a little early to get ready for games on Fridays and this would mean losing half of the people in the room. Even though we could easily manage without all of the cheerleaders and the lone football player present, I agreed that it would be better for group cohesion if we included everyone.

And besides, who else but myself would want to actually do work on a Friday? I thought we would be finished for the day as all of my talking points had been exhausted, but Ashley raised her hand to speak and Lauren gave her the floor. I was curious as to what she had to say. Upon closer inspection, she looked like she had been crying earlier.

“So Spencer called me yesterday and said he’s doing alright,” she said, her voice sounding tired and world-weary. “I mean, as alright as he can be, but I feel like we should do something for him. Like, go out to see him or send him a card or something, I don’t know. I know some people are driving down there on Saturday to check up on him, but maybe we could do something, too? Just us?”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Lauren said with a warm smile. “Do you know how long he will be there for?”

“About a week, he says. Maybe less.”

“Maybe some of us could drive down there tomorrow and see him if people don’t have practice or too much homework,” Lauren suggested. “Or today. I don’t have plans so I can go when this is over. I know it’s a two and a half hour drive, but...” She stopped talking, unsure of how to continue.

As much as I did not feel like spending my afternoon in the hospital with so much left to plan and do, I knew I would be failing as a girlfriend if I did not go with her. Despite his social life suffering a self-inflicted gunshot straight into his temple, he still held sway around here and us being seen with him would be very good for our image. With Ashley on our staff and after all we had done to help her, he was all but ours. We just needed to assure his loyalty by hearing it from personally.

"Looks like it's settled," I decided. "If anyone wants to come along with us to see Spencer, we can organize a carpool. But please don't feel obligated to go given how short notice it is and the length of the trip. He's going to be home soon anyway and I'm sure he will have time to see people while he is recovering."

God only knows how long he will take to be back here and be the talk of the halls again. Making sure he trusts us completely by then will be crucial.

No one else had anything left to say so we concluded with ten minutes to go. I was sure we would have more topics to discuss by Thursday when we would meet again, but in the meantime we could all use a day off to gather our thoughts and let things develop. Even though I would be spending the day with many of them as I went to see Spencer, not talking shop would be good for all of us.

The inner circle of the group stayed back to discuss plans along with Victoria and Jasmine, who served as Victoria's sidekick. Lauren, Victoria, and Jasmine talked in the corner of the room while I waited with Katherine and Ashley to see what was going on.

"Hey," Ashley said to me after a few moments of silence. "Thank you for doing this. Going with me to see Spencer, I mean."

"Of course!" I said with feigned enthusiasm. "I want to see how he's doing as much as you do."

"You did really well back there," Katherine said. I could tell she meant it. "You're kinda born for this."

I smiled modestly and lowered my voice. "Anything I can do to help the group. And her."

Whether I subconsciously wanted to continue to burn our relationship into Ashley's brain as a way of punishing her or it was simply me humble-bragging that I had the most perfect girlfriend to ever walk the Earth standing only a few feet away from me, I did not know. But my intentions were pure and I wanted this to succeed more than anything else in the world.

After Victoria and Jasmine finished their conversation, they headed for the door and gave us all smiles as they walked by. Lauren walked over and exhaled hard. "Oh, I'm so glad that's over," she said, exasperated. "I hate talking in front of people."

"You did fine," I said. "Don't sweat it."

"*You* did fine. *I* was a wreck. Thanks so much for stepping in."

"Whatever helps the team," I repeated.

"So Victoria and Jasmine are going to drive down with us," Lauren informed us. "They'll stick around for a little while, but they can't stay long. Victoria has a car so they can drive themselves."

"Do you mind giving me a ride?" Katherine asked. "I wanted to see him, too."

Ashley smirked at her. "I'll drive you. I know he'll be *really* happy to see you."

If there was some hidden meaning here, I was woefully uninformed and it went straight over my head. I can only assume either Katherine has a horrible crush on the wounded quarterback or he is trying to fuck her brains out and Ashley wants to watch. Most likely the former. The latter would be funny, though.

"I guess we can meet outside after the bell rings," I said, looking more at Lauren than the others. Ashley and Katherine took the hint and left for their lockers. I held Lauren back to talk for a moment.



Checking to be sure no one was watching, I gave her a brief but passionate kiss and stared deep into her eyes. “Wasn’t this amazing?” I dreamily asked. I was in Heaven. Everything worked out so well. All of our hard work had paid off. This was where we belonged.

“It was, wasn’t it,” Lauren said, giggling a little. She had such a cute laugh.

“We run this place now.”

She rolled her eyes a little. “We don’t run the *whole* school.”

“Not yet, maybe. But it’s you and me against the world. We can do anything together.”

## **BROKEN DREAMS**

## Spencer

Almost dying isn't so bad. I don't think so, anyway.

I forgot most of what happened in the lead up to the crash. I passed out for a couple seconds after I hit the tree and got a concussion. Second one in two years. In terms of physical damage, I only suffered a broken leg, dislocated arm, and sprained wrist. The leg wouldn't be good enough to walk on for a long time, but I didn't mind. I deserved a rest. I was going to be stuck in the hospital for a few days so I had more than enough time to relax.

*Only.*

Surgery wasn't so bad I guess, even though the idea of going through it again scared me more than dying. I got a fancy set of screws and a plate in my leg. Besides the physical pain and injuries, I was doing well. I guess. The truck took the worst of it; it was completely totaled. The only real highlight was the painkillers they pumped into me. I don't know what it was, but it was Heaven on Earth. I can see why people get hooked on this shit.

I woke up with a nurse hovering over me, changing my IV bag. The lights were turned down low to help my head with the concussion. I was terrified to see someone just standing there quietly looming over me in the darkness.

"You know it scares the hell out of me when you just come in without saying anything, right?"

She smiled and went about her business as though I wasn't there.

"Or, like, knocking. I mean, I totally respect you're doing your job and wanting me to, like, sleep, but it's still weird to wake up to someone standing over you, you know?"

She finished installing the new bag and I felt the sweet release of what I assume to be morphine coursing through my veins. I passed out soon after. It was heavenly. I was in a lot of pain, despite my relatively high spirits.

I learned after my surgery that I was taken to Huntsville after the crash. I guess I didn't realize how far I had driven after I left school. I checked my phone, which miraculously survived, and learned the fastest route back home was between two and three hours. I was basically stranded in the middle of nowhere with no way to get back to Arlington. Part of me thought that wasn't the worst thing ever.

It must have taken a day or word to reach my family about my situation because I didn't see them until early the next morning. Visiting hours must have just begun because they were the first people I saw through the glass doors walking around the hallways.

Megan stood in the doorway while he waited outside and talked to a nurse. She looked like she'd been crying. I wondered how long it took for them to get down here. I raised my good arm and gave her a wave. Just moving hurt like Hell.

"Hey there, Sis."

She couldn't take her eyes off of the sling over my shoulder and the cast on my leg. She slowly walked in, trying desperately not to stare and failing miserably in her attempt. "What happened to you?"

"Slipped on a bar of soap." I stole that line from an old movie Ashley had me watch with her one night. She has a thing for old movies. We never made out or anything whenever she put on a movie, despite my best efforts. She would die before she let someone come between her and a movie she wanted to see.

"That must have been one helluva bar of soap," she joked, her voice cracking a little.

"I made sure to get a good hit in before I went down," I said while praying the IV drip would give me a little relief faster than it was supposed to.

That was when Megan began to cry again. I motioned for her to come toward me and let me hug her with my good arm. My whole body was achy and beat up, but I could force myself to endure it for a hug. I owed her that much, considering.

“Hey, hey, hey don’t cry, I’m fine,” I assured her. “It’s not like I couldn’t have gotten these same injuries playing football, you know. And besides, they pumped me full of enough drugs to kill a buffalo. I feel great!”

I was so happy to see her chuckle a little bit, despite the tears. Even if I was at the lowest point of my life, I still knew how to make her smile. She didn’t deserve this.

“Good for you, buddy,” she said as she wiped her eyes with a tissue from the box beside my bed.

“So how’s school been?” I was desperate to change the subject and if there was one thing that Megan liked to talk about, it was herself and her misadventures in middle school.

She wasted no time going into a big monologue about how much she hated her grade and wanted to be in high school already. “Boring and stupid,” she answered. “Bridgette said she found some weed in her brother’s sock drawer and smoked it all while he was working and wouldn’t shut up about how crazy high she got. But *Candice* thinks she is full of shit and she never smoked anything in her life. And now a few guys want her to snag them some weed the next time her brother gets some and it’s so stupid.”

“You aren’t trying to smoke, right?” I smoked once in my life and hated every second of it. I got crazy paranoid. I’m totally cool with other people smoking and I know Megan might eventually, but I’d rather she waited until college to do it if it was going to happen at all.

“No,” she promised. “I don’t even know how to get any.”

My bro-ternal duties fulfilled, I went back to attempting to lighten the mood. “But anyways, you aren’t allowed to call anything boring and stupid.”

“Why?”

I leaned in closer towards her. “I’ve had an itch on my right ankle for three straight days and the only things on TV are shopping channels, talk shows, and reruns of shows on Nickelodeon I’ve never even heard of. I can handle breaking my leg, but this is torture.”

“You mean you don’t like the little kid shows on Nickelodeon?” She smirked at me.

“When you’re born and raised on prime *Spongebob*, *Drake and Josh*, and *Zoey 101*, your standards are too high for this new crap. *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, motherfucker.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You watched *Zoey 101*?”

“I nearly wept when the little teaser reunion got released,” I admitted. “Those two belong together.” She shook her head with utter disappointment at the thought of her masculine older brother weeping at a children’s show. “I’m more shocked that you’ve even heard of *Zoey 101*,” I continued. “You’re like... What? Twelve?”

“I hate you.”

I could see he was ready to come in. I had to get her out of the room. “Do you hate me enough to leave and get me some food? I’m starving.”

“Maybe,” she replied. “What do you want and where’s your wallet?”

I pointed to the pocket in my hoodie that was still stained with some dried blood. I was surprised to see they didn’t just throw it out when I got here. I would have. She hesitated when she saw the stains and carefully reached into the pocket to dig out my wallet. It somehow managed to survive the crash, too.

I looked over at the doorway and saw him looking inside. I knew it was time to face the music. I didn’t want Megan here for this.

“So what do you want?” she asked again.

"Surprise me," I replied with honest indecisiveness. I really didn't care. Seeing him made me lose my appetite.

"It's probably gonna suck," she said as she walked towards the door.

"It's hospital food," I called out. She was already gone.

We locked eyes for a while, neither person wanting to make the first move. He looked away from me and stared out the window. I was lucky and got a room with a nice view of the countryside rather than the town. I hate the city.

"Well," he finally began, considering his words carefully before saying them. "You look like shit."

I rubbed my temple with my good hand. My concussion already gave me a headache, but this was the icing on the cake to make me hurt so bad, I felt sick to my stomach. "Dad, for God's sake..."

"I'm kidding," he said with a cool smile. "Jeez, take a pill."

"I am. A lot of them."

He observed the IV drip. "They got you on the good shit?" I didn't answer so he went on. "I wrecked my dirt bike when I was about your age. Really screwed my leg up, too. Couldn't play anything for a full year. I was fuckin' miserable."

"I guess I won't be playing football anymore either," I not-so-subtly taunted.

His smug grin faded a little. "I guess not. Tree sure did a number on you, huh?"

"I can't remember. But I do remember the note you left on the front door." He said nothing. I went on. "You said... ah, what'd you say? *Don't bother coming back* or something like that, I think? Memory is a bit fuzzy from that day. The concussion is pretty bad."

"Not as bad as beating up your teammate in the locker room," he countered. "I talked to your coach after you ran off. I went out to look for you when you didn't come home, you know. I figured you'd be back by dinner. Just didn't think you'd end up all the way out here."

"He raped Ashley," I muttered. Just saying it made me sick.

"Spencer, just... just calm down, alright?"

I know he doesn't care. He only ever saw her as a distraction. Something I would be too busy fucking to focus on football. God forbid I did or else he'd be at risk of not retiring early and becoming the breadwinner of the family. If I did make it big and got to the NFL, I'd make sure he never saw a dime of my money. But it doesn't matter anymore. I was done with football.

"Brad tried to rape Ashley," I repeated. "How could I *not* try to murder the motherfucker?"

"Be sure to say that when the police come looking for you," my father advised. "I guarantee his parents aren't going to let this go without a fight. But please, let them know you wanted to kill the guy and it wasn't just some case of boys being boys or some shit like that. If you want to end up in prison, just keep it up."

I wanted to call him every dirty word in the book. I wanted to jump up and beat him within an inch of his life. I wanted to piss in his eyes and knock every single one of his teeth out. I wanted to hurt him so bad, they'd put him in the room beside mine.

But my head was killing me and I was stuck in bed.

He wasn't finished. "Ashley wasn't a bad girl. When she wasn't holding you back, anyway. She was good for you. But she had her own baggage. I could see it just by looking at her. I heard all the stories the other parents told under their breaths at those stupid PTA meetings and in the hallways on days when we had the parent-teacher conferences. I've lived a little. I know how women work. With all the shit she

was dealing with, she was a weight on your back. No matter how hard you struggled and fought, she would just hold you down. I've dated a lot of girls and I can just see when one isn't good for you."

I swallowed my pride and let him finish his speech. I wanted to kill him as badly as I wanted to kill Brad. I've wanted to for years now. Every backhand, every punch. Seventeen years of bullshit and I couldn't do anything about it. Not now, anyway.

"Well, don't worry about your bills," he went on. "You're lucky I have such good insurance. You don't need to pay a penny. *You're lucky.*"

I was done talking and he knew this. When Megan came back, he left. She showed me a cafeteria tray holding some delicious cheeseburgers and fries for us to eat. She could tell I was upset as she handed me my food. "What happened?"

"Had a fight. Like usual."

After we ate, Megan got a text from our good father saying it was time to go. She felt bad about leaving me, but I knew it was a long drive back to Arlington and she had school in the morning. I'm a screw up in my own way and I'm not letting her ruin her education over me.

"Megan, I'll be fine," I said. "Go live your life! You're only a kid once."

"You sound like a grandpa or something."

"I feel like a grandpa." I waved my bad arm around lazily in its sling and got a laugh from her.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," she promised.

She hugged me tight and I suppressed a groan of pain until after she left. I figured he wouldn't be back to say goodbye. I didn't see him again for the rest of the day. Megan told me later that he went to wait back in his truck and didn't speak to her for the entire ride home. I felt terrible for leaving her alone with him for a week.

"Love you," I said as she was about to leave.

"Love you, too."

I spent the next few hours napping, talking with nurses, and watching TV shows I had no real interest in. I resigned myself to a fate of being stuck here until I got discharged on Friday or Saturday. It could be worse. I told myself that to boost my spirits when I got specially upset.

*I could be dead...*

I didn't know if that was a blessing or a curse.

It was around six when I heard a knock at the door, waking me from a daydream that seemed to last an hour. I was eating a pudding cup and staring out the window. Hearing someone knock scared me. I nearly dropped my little chocolatey treat all over the floor. When I turned, I was surprised to see Lauren and Beth standing in the doorway with Victoria Falco and Jasmine Jackson standing behind them.

"Better be careful," Lauren warned. "That stuff goes straight to your thighs."

"Good!" I declared in defiance. I took a large spoonful and ate it while staring her in the eyes. Before swallowing, I made sure to give the girls a toothy grin with the pudding splattered all over my teeth. Beth and Jasmine seemed less than enthused to see my dessert, but Lauren and Victoria seemed to find it amusing.

I motioned for them to enter my little man cave and that was when I realized Katherine was here as well. And Ashley. Ashley looked mortified to see me like this. I didn't show her my pudding teeth. It didn't feel appropriate considering everything. I had not expected anyone to actually make the trip down here to see me, especially on a school day in the middle of the week. I ended up having company for the next two hours until the nurses had to kick them out when visiting hours were over.

## Kate

We all gathered around and listened to Spencer recount his hospital war stories. Surviving his first surgery, meeting cute nurses, morphine. Getting him to not be a little smug ass about everything was impossible. It was something I loved about him. He said was in a fair amount of pain, but he was in high spirits around us. I could see how bad he wanted to just inhale whatever drugs they had him on to make the pain go away. I felt bad watching him put on a brave face for us.

Seeing all these people hanging out with Spencer was strange. I don't think I've ever seen him hang out with anyone besides the other guys on the team and Ashley, Casey, and Heather. I didn't even think Victoria and Jasmine were his friends. But then again, I'm not his friend so I really don't really know who he talks to.

I didn't find it annoying when Ashley tried to get me to speak more so Spencer would notice me, but instead I found it incredibly disheartening. All of the other girls in the room were so much hotter and cooler than I am. Even Beth, who never put effort into looking good, is so much prettier than I am and I know it.

"So Kate," Ashley said, snapping me out of my self-deprecating daydream, "how does it feel to be on student council now?"

"Oh, you know," I said with a little laugh as I realized everyone was staring at me now. "I'm just glad I was considered for the job."

Spencer laughed a little. "Trust me, you're gonna hate it. I did."

"You got to hang out with your friends the whole time while me and Tracy did all of the work," Ashley protested. "How could you have hated it?"

I winced when I heard that name.

He shrugged. "Like I told you a couple weeks ago, I didn't even want to run. *You* wanted me to. I wanted to focus on myself and relax." He glanced down at his leg. "And hey look, I got my wish! Everybody wins!"

Ashley wasn't happy that he was shooting her down like that. Victoria saw this and spoke up to break the tension a bit. "So what happened exactly? How did you wreck?"

"Coyote ran out in the middle of the road," he quickly answered. "I freaked out and tried to swerve and the tree was waiting for me. *But* I did save the coyote so it wasn't all bad. I couldn't live with myself if I hurt an animal. Destroyed the truck, though."

He didn't seem as bothered by the loss of his truck as I would have thought. He treated that monster like it was his own child when we were at school. I wondered if he has some new outlook on life following a near-death experience. One of those "every day is a gift" points of view. I heard that is common in people who almost die. Maybe he will go from Arrogant Caribbean Presidente to humble and benevolent benefactor of the school. It would be an interesting transition.

Without a second thought, Spencer paid for our dinner himself. He said he ate when his sister came over so he just sat and talked with us. We probably spent two hundred bucks on dinner that day and he didn't say anything about it. He knew we wouldn't be able to stop for anything on the ride home because we had school the next morning so he didn't hesitate to pull out the debit card. Victoria and Jasmine took care of getting our food while Ash, Lauren, Beth, and I stuck around.

"Congrats on winning, by the way," Spencer randomly announced in the middle of a conversation about dumb stories from Chemistry class last year, a class almost all of us shared together. "I just realized I forgot to say something before."

Lauren smiled at him. "Well, thank you, Spencer. I forgot to tell you I voted for you."

Beth glanced over at her. "Did you?"

"No, but I thought about it," Lauren said cheerfully with a wink. Spencer smiled in return. Beth just rolled her eyes and continued to eat her burger.

Part of me regretted not voting for him. It was the same disgusting part of me that wished I had gone along with Tracy. I wished that part of me would shrivel up and die.



## Ashley

*Holy fuck, he's totally in love with her.*

*You would have to be as blind as Helen Keller to not see how much he's into her. Like, shit, he was never this flirty with me when we were dating and I'm me. He hasn't taken his eyes off of her this whole time. How long has he been into her? I know for a fact he wasn't trying to cheat on me or anything, and even if he did I only would have cared because he wouldn't have told me beforehand and because it's... well... her.*

*Like if he would have gone for another girl after I came out to him and we were still pretending to be together, I wouldn't have cared. Obviously. I would have been really uncomfortable if he had gone after her specifically, but whatever. I just want them to be happy. Especially her.*

*Does she know? He's being pretty obvious about it right now. Does anyone else see what I see? I haven't really considered them as a couple before today. If it's gonna happen then who am I to judge? Sure, it would be weird seeing them together but it's not like I didn't actively push them together in a way by bringing her here. They can thank me later for playing matchmaker. I'm pretty cool like that.*

*But what I want to know is if she sees it?*

## Beth

Meeting with Spencer was not as much of a waste of time as I had predicted it would be. While Spencer spent time with Ashley, Lauren, and Katherine on the other side of the surprisingly spacious hospital room, I got to meet with Victoria and Jasmine. I had never spoken to them before so this was as good a time as any to introduce myself to the people I would be sharing the Student Council office with for the rest of the school year.

"I just realized we never actually met before," I said with an inviting smile. "So... hello!"

I have never been great at introductions. Or speaking to people in general. That was not my finest moment.

Victoria did not seem to mind, or at least refused to let herself show it. She laughed a little and said, "Hey. How's it feel to be the Vice President?"

"Good. Very good." I hated talking about myself. "This is your first time doing Student Council, too, right?"

Jasmine nodded her head. "We lost Freshman year, but we were close. That's what Hardy said, anyway."

"We're really excited!" Victoria finished for both of them. "I think this is gonna be a lot of fun!"

Even after factoring in all of her baggage from the previous year, I was still surprised that Victoria did not throw her hat in the ring for the election for President. Her popularity would have made her a powerful opponent. Combine that with the pity vote from what happened and I really think she could have beaten Lauren. Her status as the beloved victim makes her a valuable ally. Having her on our side was vital so any courting I could do now can and will pay off later.

I suspect the reason she did not run for President this year was due to the scandal that happened shortly after I arrived in Arlington. I was still extremely anxious and could not bring myself to speak to anyone. Even though I was all but a mute, people had no problems approaching me as they went down the line of whoever they could find in the cafeteria to give the latest gossip.

"Did you hear what happened?" asked the nerdy kid with a smile far too wide for the subject matter. I never got his name, and for good reason.

"Um... no?"

"Victoria Falco's nudes got leaked and everyone's showing them off." He extended his arm to show me his phone. Somehow, somehow, this little dweeb had a copy of the pictures in question. Victoria's naked body was on full display while she made a suggestive face for the boy they were actually meant for. It was the strangest thing in the world just being shown a girl's naked picture in the middle of the cafeteria. Like watching TV on a sick day when you should be in Chemistry class.

Three things went through my mind then and continue to swirl around in my brain when it replays over and over in my head.

The first, and most important issue, was the fact that this boy was proudly displaying child pornography for all the world to see. Victoria was only fifteen at the time and even though I fully support the sharing of nude pictures between consenting parties, as it would be hypocritical of me to say I have never *allegedly* sent pictures of myself to Lauren to show her how much I love and trust her, it is still a naked picture of a child and therefore child pornography. The fact that Victoria did not end up in prison after news reached faculty is a testament to her family's influence over the school, the Falco family being major donors to their arts program. Punish their daughter and they cut off the funding completely. I do love politics. It would have been bullshit if she got punished, though.

The second issue was the fact that this pathetic worm somehow got ahold of them. This kid was at the bottom of the totem pole and would never be able to get these pictures without being given them by some other loser. Hearing that he bought them from one of the jocks would have been less of a surprising revelation than the CIA killing JFK and MLK. The worst part of it all is this little shit had to have sought them out with the express intention of showing them to everyone. He was nothing but a leech trying to get some cred from total strangers who would forget him seconds after he left. What a sad excuse for a man.

The third issue, and I cannot stress this one enough, is how much of a fucking moron this kid was. Not only did he have no qualms with showing a naked picture of a girl in his school, maybe even in his own grade, to another classmate, but he also showed it off to another girl. Here is a fun fact about showing naked pictures of people: not everyone wants to see it. Not everyone wants to see the naked body of someone they have Geography class with so every time they see her walk around, they picture them without their clothes on and ruin their view of the person forever.

Another fun fact is, though he did not know this at the time, not every gay person is sexually attracted to someone of their same gender. If this was some prank on me to see if I would have been interested in her, it would have failed. Just because I am gay does not mean I am interested in every woman I meet. In fact, I hate most people around me. Lauren does not want to screw everyone she knows and Ashley does not want to have sex with me.

The kid ran away before I could reprimand him, presumably to show it off to the next person he could find. Not that I would have said anything, though. I was too timid for my good.

Needless to say, Victoria's social life went down the toilet following this incident. She missed a week of school afterward. Ashley's return following her failed attempt at escaping her pathetic little life paled in comparison to Victoria's return to school. She was seen as a victim and martyr by people all over the school, but everyone had seen her pictures. The girls rallied behind her and did their best to make her happy again. She spiraled into a very bad depression, or so the story went. Some people said she got hooked on heroin. I never saw any track marks, but she did start wearing longer clothing. I think she was afraid of even showing an inch of skin.

Principal Patrick did her no favors by refusing to go after the people sharing. They called us into a mandatory assembly on "online privacy" that was a total joke. Even though most people use the same two or three passwords for everything, I think everyone under the age of forty understands the basics of staying safe on the Internet.

They funneled us all into the gym and separated us by grade. I really wanted to be with Grace, but I couldn't. We were already getting really close and she said she wanted to do something to help Victoria out, even though they weren't friends. O'Reilly took the stage and started ranting about the basics of Internet privacy: don't share passwords, don't give out your Social Security number, talk to your parents if someone weird talks to you and asks for... well he never finished that sentence, but we all knew what he wanted to say.

Needless to say, it was a mess. Some assholes referred to it as the "Victoria Falco Memorial Concert" in the following days. She was the most notable absence. It was for the best. How could anyone pay attention to the speakers when she was sitting right there?

The worst part of it all was that it wouldn't be the only time that name would be used for a major assembly that year. The only difference was the name of the victim.

Seeing her sitting a few feet away from me was just... strange. Knowing what I know and having seen the most well-known picture from the bunch. She seemed to be doing better. If that was even possible.

“And by the way,” Victoria went on, “we were hoping to talk to you about the whole thing with the Treasurer job.”

I saw exactly what this meeting was the moment those words passed through her lips. They did not come along to meet with Spencer and comfort him in his time of need. They wanted me as a go-between for themselves and Lauren. Victoria and Lauren were chummy, to put it best, though their water fountain relationship faded along with most of Victoria’s social connections in the aftermath of the scandal. She stopped speaking to nearly everyone, save Jasmine who was right by her side through it all. You would think a friendship as enduring as this would incite rumors of a secret relationship and you would be correct.

I have heard stories through the grapevine that “so and so” thinks myself and Lauren are fucking. I brushed them off, but it was concerning to know people were catching on. Grace figured out Ashley and Lauren were together pretty easily. In Victoria and Jasmine’s case, there is photographic evidence to prove Victoria was more interested in boys. She was dating Vinny Romano for Christ’s sake. Even so, despite claims by ignorant buffoons, bisexuality is very much a thing. Perhaps they do have a little “Sally on the Side” situation going on behind closed doors? It is absolutely worth investigating.

Nevertheless, I played ignorant and open to suggestions. “Yeah, I feel bad I couldn’t find someone for Lauren to nominate. She had a few ideas, but we were holding out for someone who is actually good with money, you know? And after all the stuff with Prom and Homecoming going *waaaaay* over budget last year...”

Victoria nodded. “I totally understand.”

Jasmine smiled and cut in. “Which is why we wanted you to meet our friend, Hannah. Do you know her? Hannah Waters?”

I shrugged my shoulders. I never met her, at least not that I could recall. Maybe if I saw her, I would recognize her?

“She’s a real sweetheart,” Victoria swore. “And her mother is a big event planner around here. She owns this big company with, like, ten employees and everything. Hannah is supposed to inherit it one day. She’s great with money.”

“We could really use her,” Jasmine finished, hoping this would push me to hire her on the spot without so much as an interview.

This left me in a difficult spot. On one hand, I would need their loyalty going forward so Lauren and I could have free reign around the school. On the other, a concession this early could spell disaster for us. The more we give, the more they will take. If we give them more allies, they could use it against us one day. If the day ever came when Lauren and Victoria ran against one another for the Presidency during Senior year, they could use any successes Hannah had and claim them as their own.

I thought it over for a moment before responding, choosing my words extremely carefully. “Uh... okay, let me talk it over with Lauren and after we talk to some of the people we had in mind and I can meet with Hannah during lunch or study hall or something.”

They seemed satisfied enough and continued on with the conversation. I paid attention and gave them the time of day they required, but nothing more. I had a lot to do now. I realized that I would need to expedite my plans with the threat of an outsider joining our ranks and muddying the waters. I decided it was time to pay a visit to an old friend.

## Spencer

A doctor came to visit me after the girls all left. He had the x-ray pictures of my leg in his hand. I wasn't exactly sure what I was looking at, but I had an idea when I saw the big crack down the middle of the one on the left. Along with the pictures, I had no idea about the technical stuff he went into while showing them off to me.

The one thing I did understand was when he basically summed up how the rest of my year was going to go.

"You're not going to play football for the rest of the year," he informed me.

"Are you sure? I feel like I could run a marathon right now if you gave me a chance to stretch."

He smiled. "But with some heavy rehab and some strength and conditioning, you should be able to play next season. Your mobility will be affected depending on the quality of physical therapy you undergo, and who's to say if it ever fully recovers, but with a lot of work and some patience I think you will be fine."

The idea of not playing football again was so strange to me. It had been so long since I hadn't been able to play. Even then, the only reason I couldn't was because I was too young to sign up for Pop Warner and you needed to be in fourth grade to play sports at my grade school. In the meantime, I still played catch and learned to throw with my friends and him in our backyard.

I didn't have a joke this time. I needed the truth "But I'll be able to walk again, right?"

He chuckled a little. "Yes, you will be able to walk again. You should thank your dad for getting you the truck he did. All you got was... call it a little scratch compared to what could have happened if you were driving a normal car."

*It's a pretty big fuckin' scratch...*

The doctor finished talking about plans for the rest of the week. I would be discharged on Saturday and be able to return to my home. After that, I could return to school in a week or so after some more rest and relaxation. I was basically going to be stuck in a wheelchair and have to hobble around on crutches for the next two months. Imaging myself trying to dance on crutches at Homecoming was a particularly comical thought. Hell, it might even be an improvement.

After he left, I did some hard thinking about what was going on. I started to feel guilty about the situation I was in. My sister would have to take care of me when she was home and he wasn't. Not only that, but he would have to be *fatherly* and actually be around more to get me to doctor appointments and physical therapy. Both scenarios that made me feel like shit.

I left the team on a really bad note considering what had happened in the locker room. I will never regret my actions, however, but leaving them all hating me before I got hurt was a shitty way to go out. It would be nice if some of them actually came to visit me...

And then I remembered that I was off the team.

The only thing I ever cared about was gone. I had nowhere to turn to for stress relief. Or for a hope of getting into college and actually being able to pay for it. Or any friends.

And then I realized I didn't care.

All my life, I've been striving to live up to the shadows of people I have never even met. Bret Favre, Peyton Manning, Tom Brady. All larger than life names who have done things people can only dream of. I was thrust into the spotlight because I was supposed to be the meal ticket for my dad, who was already obscenely wealthy, just so he could prove a point. I was forced to become a leader even though I

hate giving orders to people. I hate taking charge and feeling like an asshole to other people when I raise my voice or bark commands at people.

There's another reason I hated playing, though, and it had nothing to do with feeling like a dickhead for screaming at people to keep our heads on straight. I might be good at throwing a football and reading a defense, but I hate getting hit. When we are first allowed to tackle each other in our training camp over the summer, everyone loses their shit because the real action starts and we can be guys kicking the shit out of each other like the monkeys we evolved from. But I hate it. It just means there are eleven guys on the field who want to take my head off and if my five or six or seven blockers cannot hold their own while I have to make a play happen, I get my head taken off. Getting hit over and over and over is painful. They add up. I've had three concussions in my life and they are not pleasant. This is somehow the first time I have ever broken a bone, but I've gotten my fingers and arms and feet and legs crushed so badly between the other guys that I might as well have broken something.

Leaving the guys was the hardest part. I know they were counting on me to win a State Championship. Justin and Jamar are good, but I know they aren't me. As much of an asshole as I may be for saying that, sometimes you need to admit that you're the best at something. I was the best quarterback Arlington had, maybe even ever.

I had to keep telling myself that this is a team game and if they can't win with me, that's their problem. I told myself that so I could fall asleep at night. It took a lot of convincing before it finally set in. There was this little voice in the back of my head that blamed myself for everything wrong in my life. That I deserved this and let everyone down.

As fucked as it is to say, being told I couldn't play football anymore from two different people was... relieving. I couldn't play at Arlington again because of my actions and my injury knocked me out for the rest of the year. There was no way I could do it. As much as I loved it, I hated it, too. Now I was a junkie who couldn't afford his next fix and had to go clean. And I was damn sure I was going clean. I was going to detox myself from football. No more playing, no more film study, no more overanalyzing the playbook. If I was lucky, I would stop dreaming about playing altogether. Those nightmares where I was in the pocket and I can't make myself move my body as the linebacker was about to crush me like a bug are the worst. I prayed they would go away soon.

I could finally work on myself. Make myself a better person.

I knew I'd really become an asshole between Sophomore and Junior year. Being on top really messes with your head. Everyone giving you what you want without a second thought, everyone trying to be your "friend" despite not even knowing your birthday, girls throwing themselves at you even though you don't have free time to spend with them. Vain as it sounds, I was entranced by the life of someone who peaked in high school.

What sixteen year old doesn't want to be loved and not worry about what happens after they toss their graduation cap in the air?

While we were talking, Lauren had suggested that we do an assembly on safe driving when I return. I couldn't tell if it was a not-so-subtle dig at me for crashing my truck or if it was meant to be informative and actually try to prevent some dumbass from pulling a me so I smirked and said, "Hey if you need a speaker, I think I'd make a pretty good example of what *not* to do."

She seemed to find this amusing. "Thankfully we don't have to have one about drunk driving. Those are always depressing."

“The club is literally called SADD.” Out of all the clubs I had the option of joining, *Students Against Destructive Decisions* was not one of them. I may drink with the guys at parties, but I’m not stupid enough to drink and drive. Only a fucking moron does that.

“I hear it’s a real party,” Lauren said with a smile. She had a cute smile.

“Remember the one we had to do last year?” Ashley asked.

“Oh, Jesus Christ.” I rubbed my temple as the memory flooded back into my mind.

The teacher who ran the club, Mrs. Everett, was a hardcore religious nut who took this kinda stuff seriously. She made the SADD kids lay on the ground in the gym while some kid in a Grim Reaper costume stood beside her as she read off how they died. All alcohol or drug related. After each one was given their eulogy, the Reaper took a white sheet and covered them with it. It did less to educate us on the dangers of alcohol abuse and drunk driving and more to just bum us out as we wasted a half-hour at the end of the school day. The kid playing the Reaper was this freakishly tall basketball player named Lonnie Dum. He got suspended for three days when he ran around the hallways beating kids over the heads with the scythe while the rest of the team laughed and filmed it.

“You know he hit me, right?” Lauren asked after laughing with us. “Then he almost ran me over as he ran away from Patrick.”

“They found him hiding in the bathroom,” I said. “He thought he could just wait it out and they’d give up. He was still dressed up and everything. Some Seniors thought there was a school shooter in the stall and ran to get help.”

“He’s huge!” Lauren exclaimed. “How could he ever get away without being caught?! Especially in the costume he was in. Jesus.”

“How tall even is he?” Katherine asked.

I shrugged. “I’m 6’4” and he’s at least a head taller than I am. Close to seven feet?”

“Oh, my God,” Lauren said as she pictured him in her mind.

Lauren, Ashley, Katherine, and I talked until it was time for them to go home. Victoria, Jasmine, and Beth chimed in for a little while at the end, but they mostly kept to themselves. It was alright. I really liked getting to know Lauren and Katherine. They’re really cool. Lauren talked about how the volleyball team was going to send me a card when I got back home. Even though I hated people “*thinking about me*” because of hating knowing people are talking about me behind my back, the thought was sweet and I thanked her for it. Ashley was pretty quiet for the first hour or so. She seemed very nervous to be there. Or guilty. Talking about SADD and laughing at the Lonnie situation really warmed her up, though, and she started chatting like normal after that.

When the nurse came to say that visiting hours were over and we had to wrap it up, I felt bad that they were here so late and they still had to drive two hours to get home.

“Trust me, we came because we care about you,” Lauren said warmly. “We don’t mind making the drive. We were all glad to see you.”

Lauren gave me a hug as she left, careful to avoid the messed up wrist and shoulder. She smelled like vanilla. She leaned in close as she hugged me and whispered, “I’ll see you soon.” quietly into my ear before pulling away. I shuddered a little. Ashley hugged me next. Katherine gave me a brief hug as well while the others smiled and waved and nodded.

I was left with the smell of vanilla wafting into my nose, each whiff more intoxicating than the last. I actually got goosebumps when Lauren spoke to me. She was so close to me and her breath was so warm when it caressed my neck. Her chest had brushed onto my arm for a moment when she hugged me

and that only made me more uncomfortable and aroused. I tried to push these thoughts deep into my mind so they would go away, but they just kept lingering.

*She's hot and she turned you on for a second, I told myself. That's it.*

I couldn't think of anyone else for the rest of the night.



## Lauren

Beth talked on and on during the car ride home about Victoria and Jasmine and their choice for who should be the Treasurer, but I couldn't bring myself to pay attention. I felt so bad for what happened. Spencer is a good guy. He didn't deserve to be in this much pain and go through what he did. I felt bad for not listening to Beth, but I felt worse for Spencer.

Knowing what I know about Brad only made it worse. Spencer got kicked off of the team because of that monster. I could probably get him back on if I came forward with what I saw, but I know it would be pointless. All I have is my word. The bruise I got from being slammed into the wall went away days before, and bruises prove nothing unless you can prove who gave them to you.

My biggest fear was if I did come forward, people would suspect me of lying for Ashley as a way to ruin Brad's life. If they started digging more, they'd probably come to the conclusion that we were together at one point. Everyone knows we were the closest of friends whose friendship fell apart quite literally overnight, but nobody knows why. All it would take is one person to put the pieces together and we would be doomed. I don't want to drag Ashley and Beth down with me because I wanted to do the right thing. It's not fair.

I'm in the same boat as Ashley. My grandparents would disown me if they learned I was gay. Even though my parents are successful and independent and taught me not to take shit from anyone, they are very much controlled by my grandparents who absolutely hate each other. Before my parents divorced, it was a nightmare to even think of Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner and we suffered from PTSD year-round as the holidays got closer. But *God forbid* we didn't invite them or there would be hell to pay. Probably the only thing that could unite them would either be their mutual hatred of their gay grandchild or their hatred of how they treated me because it was too soft and the punishment did not fit the crime.

To put it bluntly, I would be homeless if I did not stay in the closet. My parents wouldn't care, though. My mom may have inherited her parents' wealth and looks and my dad may have inherited his parents' hard-working attitude, but neither of them inherited the spitefulness and cruelty they were capable of.

I did, though. Being online every day and growing up with access to seeing what the lowest forms of life have to say about people like me made me so resentful of the human race. I might not have the spine to say something to someone at school, but I wouldn't take shit from anyone in my own family bashing us. I nearly threw a glass of wine in my Grandpa's face during Thanksgiving my Freshman year when she started talking about the lifting of *Don't Ask Don't Tell* a few years before.

"I just don't get why those freaks want to serve in the first place," he moaned. "They might break a nail!"

Strong words coming from a proud draft dodger.

He managed to get a laugh from my mom's parents, though, so I guess it must have been funny to someone. Who would have thought that mutual unwarranted hatred of an entire group of people would be what unites four people who fundamentally hated each other?

Beth could tell I was being distant. She reached over and rested a hand on my knee. "Hey... everything okay?"

I didn't know how to answer. I knew she disliked Spencer. She'd made that very clear. So even though it's against everything I believe in, I decided to lie through my teeth about what was really going on to make her happy. I knew exactly how to get through to her and I just hoped she would take the bait.

“I don’t know... I’ve just been thinking about Homecoming again.”

“Worried I’m going to get a date?” she asked with a sly grin.

“It’s so stupid that we can’t go together,” I said, more as a joke than a sincere complaint.

“I mean, we’re *going* to go together,” she said, trying to cheer me up. “But I get what you mean. I want people to know that we’re together, too. It sucks.”

“And I want to be able to talk to my parents about me and be able to introduce you to them as something besides my *good friend*.”

Beth lifted her arm and held my hand as I gripped the steering wheel. “I know. I want things to be different, too.”

This was something I cared a lot about, obviously, but it wasn’t the real reason I was so stressed out. I couldn’t get Spencer out of my head. He was the reason I was so upset, but part of me couldn’t explain why. Maybe it was because I hated myself for indirectly causing all of this. Why did *I* have to walk in on her and see what I did? Why did it have to be *me* of all people? Everything could have been so different if I had just stayed home that night.

“We should do something about it,” I blurted out. “Maybe we can join the Ally Club together. Show people around there that I really care. Maybe they’ll be... inspired or some shit. I don’t know, it’s something...”

The LGBTQ+ Club, more commonly known around the country as a Gay-Straight Alliance Club, or more colloquially by a number of names ranging from “The Ally Club” to “The Gay Club” to “Fags-R-Us” depending on who is discussing it, was the only way I could think of helping people like me at that school. It has a number of members, mostly people who are gay or bi and an asexual or two as well as gender-neutral and trans people, but also a fair amount of straight people who want to support their friends, with Kate being one of them. I thought that being the Student Council President would gain it some support from people who otherwise wouldn’t give a fraction of a shit about it. Just showing routinely and showing them that I care, whether they know I’m just like them or not, would be more than enough for me.

Beth gave me a sorrowful look and replied, “As much as I would love to do that with you, we can’t. Everyone who is in that club—the cis people included—they’re all immediately treated as though they were gay or trans or whatever by everyone else. Someone would assume that we were together as soon as we looked in the room. If you walk into a prison, you’re either the prisoner, the guard, or the family of the inmate.”

“That’s... kind of a fucked up analogy.”

She gave my hand a squeeze. “If that upsets you, imagine how bad you’ll feel when people treat me and you like they did Grace.”

I remember the day they announced Grace Carlisle died. They gathered us all into the auditorium and Patrick quietly made the announcement over the microphone on stage. Even though no one spoke, heads slowly began to turn towards the people who bullied her. It wasn’t even a secret who went after the hardest. She was the “I Don’t Give A Fuck About What You Think Of Me” girl that didn’t take shit from everyone. That basically dared people to be as cruel as humanly possible. It became a game to people on who could hurt her the worst. Everyone thought Homecoming was the final prank, the ultimate embarrassment, but they were wrong.

It was the opening salvo of some of the most cruel bullying I’d ever witnessed in my entire life. When they learned she was gay, it was open season.

She'd died two days before Ashley and I broke up. They just assumed she'd skipped again when she didn't show up on Friday. She started skipping a lot after the bullying began. Ashley told me that Kara would brag that they were going to get her expelled before graduation because of all the missed time. Fucking cunt.

When they made the announcement the following Monday, I couldn't stay in school because I was crying so hard. It was all too much. I'm still angry they didn't just cancel school that day and sent out a mass email or something. They corrected that and gave us Tuesday off after lots of people complained, parents included.

Before she died, I reached out to Grace one time to try to help her out, but she pushed me away. How could she trust someone who was on the same squad as Kara? I still wish I'd done more. Done something. I'll carry that regret for the rest of my life. It was a big reason why I quit the squad. Too much regret.

Ashley and I had a big heart to heart a few days before it happened. The latest prank was when someone broke into Grace's locker and stashed a bunch of porno magazines and pictures they'd gotten off the Internet so when she opened the locker door, they spilled out onto the floor. So many people crowded around her and laughed at her. Ashley swore she had no part in that.

"We can't come out," I told Ashley in the middle of her room at midnight on a Saturday while crying in her arms. "No one can know about us. I love you so fucking much, but we can't tell *anyone*. Not now."

At the time, I wanted to marry her when she said she understood and we would talk about it again when we graduated. I knew I would have to make things right with her, somehow. I owed her that much at the very least.

She slowly nodded her head, the truth crushing her. "No. I understand."

Any chance of us coming out together died that day. I got scared right back into the closet and nobody could bring me back out. Part of me hates them all because if that hadn't happened, I might have been driving Ashley home that day instead of Beth. Maybe in some weird way, I could have salvaged the relationship if we hadn't gotten spooked. Maybe she was only getting high because she was angry at herself for ever being a part of it or because she felt terrible for enabling it by not standing up to Kara? Ashley isn't a bad person. She was a victim in all of this, I just know it. Should I have tried harder to save her from herself?

*I'll always wonder what if...*

Beth woke me from my memories with a squeeze of the hand. "But that doesn't mean we can't do *nothing!*" she added with some enthusiasm. "How's this sound? We can work with the leaders and organize some kind of big event for them that *they* run so it only looks like we're being inclusive, but not become too personally involved. Call it... I don't know... November Pride! Or something like that, we can figure out a month later. Try to make the school a safer place for people like us and make sure somebody ever hurts themselves ever again at that school. How's that sound?"

I turned my head and smiled at her. It was a pained, forced smile. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she said, her eyes glistening in the glow from the radio. "Now focus on the road or else we're going to end up like Spencer."

## Spencer

Despite my intense boredom, the week actually went by pretty fast. I told Megan she should stay home and focus on homework until it was time for me to come home. Without her being here as an excuse to leave the house, he never came down to check on me. I was fine with that. I was better off alone.

When Friday came, I asked the one nurse if she knew whether the hospital had the channel that our game was going to be on.

Arlington vs. Austin Prep was the biggest game of the year, but even they weren't on par with Rockwell Allen, our rivals from across the state. Rockwell Allen was our first in-conference game of the season every year for the past twenty years. It was kind of a tradition that we kill ourselves against each other before going up against weaker opponents the next week. Whoever won this set the tone for the rest of the year. Because it was such a big game, we were actually going to be featured on ESPN3 this year. Arlington hadn't been shown on a major network in four years so this was supposed to be a big deal for us.

Unfortunately, they did not have ESPN3 in the hospital and my laptop was at home. Unless I wanted to burn all of my data streaming it on my phone, I would be unable to watch it. After deciding that this was the universe telling me to finally sever ties, and after getting a killer headache because of the concussion, I put the phone down and shut my eyes.

The nurse stepped in and told me I had a visitor. When she stepped away, I was greeted by a familiar sight.

"Hey, you," I teased. "Why aren't you at the game?"

"You really think I'm going to drive all the way out to Rockwell?" Lauren asked as she strode into the room and occupied the chair below the TV.

"You *did* just drive two hours to see me."

"Yes, but you're actually cool. And after everything that's been going on, I'm done with football for a while. But even if I wasn't, I'm not in the mood to get cooked in the bleachers. That's not worth the gas money."

"You know they have the fan bus, right?" I joked as I sat up a little. Didn't need her seeing my double chin I got from laying down.

She rolled her eyes. "As much as I'd love to ride on a Greyhound and smell the bathroom from all the way in the front row, I'll pass."

"It's impolite to take a shit on a Greyhound," I recited. "Very against the rules."

"Have you been on the student bus recently? *Ohhhh*, wait no I forgot, you're in the team bus where they beat people up for breaking that rule! My fault, I forgot." She grinned at me.

I couldn't help but laugh. "Well that's not going to be a thing for a while because..." I pointed to my leg and my shoulder with my good arm and shrugged. I tried to seem like it didn't bother me, but being basically immobilized sucks.

"Are you going to be riding around in a wheelchair when you get back?"

"I'm taking bets with myself on how long it takes before somebody pushes me down the stairs," I joked. "I'll be surprised if I make it through the first day."

She raised her hand and began waving it around. "Oh! Oh! I call dibs on pushing you around first!" she yelled, drawing some stares from nurses out in the hallway. "If anyone else tries to, tell them to fuck off. I have dibs."

“Hey, who am I to deny someone calling dibs?”

I felt myself blushing a little bit as she smiled at me. My heart started to beat faster, too. I hadn’t felt this way in so long. Just talking to Lauren was eye-opening in a way. After talking with her for a few hours, I could see exactly what made Ashley fall in love with her in the first place. She was so funny and down-to-earth. We were alone and just... *talked*. About school, homework, gossip. Anything.

She said that Ashley has been really quiet lately even though her, Beth, and Katherine are all trying to be her friend, which surprised me because I thought Ashley hated Beth. I know she stuck up for her with everything involving Brad, but I didn’t think she handled it as kindly as she could have when we had that “intervention,” if you can even call it that.

When she started talking about the bake sale going on at school the next day, she seemed absolutely exhausted by it and absolutely needed to vent. “So then, she says—”

“She being Beth, right?”

“Yes. So anyway, I don’t really want to talk about it, but she keeps pushing and says we really need to make sure we’ve got everything covered. So I say alright, fine, let’s talk about it and then *she says* that I don’t need to worry and she’s got it all covered.” She pauses to see my reaction. “And I say okay... and then I ask her what she means by that and she says that she knows a guy who will organize everything. And I ask who it is and how they are going to take care of everything in three days. I’m wondering who this guy is and why she was so adamant that we talk about this if all she’s going to do is give me vague answers. So obviously I try to press it more and she just kinda blows me off and says that I don’t know him, but she trusts him and it’s gonna be okay.” She makes a face and extends her arms as if to asked “*What the fuck does that even mean?!?*”

*Wow. Yeah. I will never be good at talking to girls about their days...*

“I mean... wow that’s a lot. Okay, um... maybe he’s just some loser that she doesn’t want you guys seen talking to,” I offered, as weak of an excuse as that was. “Or maybe he owes her one and she’s making him pay her back by getting all the food together—”

“What could he possibly owe her that comes out to, like, two hundred dollars worth of junk food?” She asked with a raised eyebrow. “Because that’s how much we’re supposed to provide. It makes no sense. I mean she said she was going to take care of it and I trust her and all, but what is she *doing?*” She sank back in her chair and shook her head. “It’s been a long week.”

“No shit.”

She snorted a little.

“Maybe she’s right. Maybe you just have to trust her.”

She sighed. “I know...”

I figured now was as good a time as any to talk to her about what I knew. But I knew I had to phrase it perfectly so it doesn’t feel like I’m cornering her or anything. I took a deep breath before finally speaking. “Hey... speaking of. Beth, I mean. Ashley told me some... things about her...”

Even from across the room, I could see her tense up a little. She tried to play it cool, though. “What about her?”

“So... look, a couple weeks ago me and Ashley had a talk and she kinda...”

I knew I was beating around the bush on this one so I wanted her to connect the dots for me. She sat up and slowly looked at me, fear written plain as day on her face. Thankfully, she finished my thought for me.

“I heard you guys broke up,” she said.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Is that really a shock? I think everyone saw us break up.”

She laughed, too, just a little bit. She had a cute little smile that made my stomach feel like it was full of air. “Yeah, you two were kinda loud, huh?”

“That wasn’t the first time we broke up... if you get my drift.” I waited to see if she would jump in again, but decided it was time to rip the bandage off. “It’s kinda hard to date someone who isn’t really into you...”

We looked at each other for a long time. I didn’t want to seem accusatory or seem like I was judging either of them because I wasn’t, obviously. But she didn’t know that and I had to find a way to let her know that I was okay with her for who she was.

“I’m guessing she told you about us then?”

I nodded. “I kinda figured it out on my own and asked *her* about it. In hindsight, I probably should have phrased it better. But I told her that I didn’t judge her for it and I wouldn’t judge anyone she had dated before either.”

Her leg was shaking a little. I could tell she was really processing this in her head. Thinking it over. I can’t imagine how she must be feeling. I just wanted her to know that I was there for her.

“Did she say anything else?” Lauren asked. “About anyone besides me?”

I told her she mentioned her and Beth were a thing. She slowly nodded and went silent again.

“Wow.”

“What?”

“Every time somebody finds out about me, it’s by total accident or somebody else telling them.” She saw that I looked concerned and quickly jumped in with, “Trust me, I’m not mad or anything. I’m honestly glad you know. Relieved, honestly. I wanted to tell you. You’re cool. I knew you’d understand.”

The words seemed to almost take the weight of the world off of her shoulders. As if finally admitting it was the single-most freeing moment of her life. I can never understand how she feels, but seeing her light up was amazing. She seemed so happy and energetic and liberated.

“Ashley said the same thing to me when we talked,” I said with a bit of a smug smile on my face. “Except the cool part. I guess something about me just makes me easy to talk to about these kinds of things.”

She laughed a little, any tension left in the air finally subsiding. “Oh, totally.” She sat forward a little more, fully relaxed. “I should say that me and her are kinda different, though.”

“How so?”

“Well Ashley is gay. Like fully gay. But I’m bi.”

“Oh, for real?” I didn’t know what else to say, but I wasn’t ruining her moment.

“Yeah.” She nervously laughed. “I *dated* a guy back when I was in middle school. Michael Salazar. He played basketball. It was stupid, but I was sure I was in love.” She then glared at me and said with complete disdain, “He cheated on me with Sara Carmichael in eighth grade and I swore off boys *forever*. I mean, she made out with him on the *ferris wheel* and made sure I was there to see it. I still hate that bitch.”

“Yeah, fuck her, what kinda person would do that?” I fake-spat on the floor. “Fuck you, Sara Carmichael!”

We both shared a long laugh and then I looked deep into her eyes. They were as bright and blue as the ocean. If she wasn’t with someone, I might have made a move on her. But I knew it would be the scummiest thing on the planet if I did that to Beth. And Ashley. Especially Ashley. It’s just a crush, nothing more.

*But God, is she so fucking hot.*

The universe threw a bucket of cold water on the both of us when the sun finally began to set. “I should probably get back soon,” she finally said while trying to avoid eye contact with me. “Gotta beat the traffic, you know?”

“Yeah,” I answered, trying with all my might to hide disappointment. “Yeah totally.”

She paused in the doorway. “But um... can I come over when you’re back home? You know, deliver your homework and check in on you and stuff?”

“Yeah. Yeah totally.”

She smiled one last time, said goodbye, and left. Even though I was all alone again, there was a new reason to go on in my heart. I couldn’t wait to get back home. Words I never thought I’d think or say in my life. For once, I had a reason to be home. And as much as I hated to admit it, I was falling for my ex-girlfriend’s ex-girlfriend.

## **BAKE SALE**



## Ashley

It was another sleepless night last night. I couldn't get the whole situation with Spencer out of my head. I knew I needed to go over to his house once he got home so I could get some one-on-one time with him. I had no intention of making that drive down to the hospital again. It wasn't just the two to three hour both ways drive, though. Hospitals freak me out. If the girls hadn't gone with me, there is no way I could have even walked in the building by myself.

Besides the crash itself, I kept thinking about Spencer and Lauren being totally into each other. It wasn't surprising at all in hindsight. They're both attractive and they're popular and they're the most popular people in school. If Lauren had stuck with cheerleading instead of committing to volleyball, she could easily have become Captain instead of me. If that had happened, there might never have been a "me and him" at all. Maybe in another reality, they would have ended up with each other instead of me.

Beth was being very distant with her in the hospital room. They are practically joined at the hip any other day of the week, but she decided to spend the whole two hours talking with Victoria and Jasmine. They're cool and all, but I seriously doubt they're the kind of people Beth wants as her friends. I heard them talking about student council stuff for most of the time while they were there. It was relieving to know someone was actually taking it seriously and stepping up to do the work this year. I was done having stuff dropped on me out of nowhere.

More than anything, I felt bad for Kate. She was totally into him and I'm trying to set them up because they would be amazing together, but he just wasn't biting. How was I supposed to know that he would start crushing on Lauren? If I would have known that, I wouldn't have invited anyone else except Kate. He could use someone who isn't full of shit. She'd be great at grounding him.

But sadly for her, he seemed to be going for the hot rich girl and she seemed to be reciprocating. Beth would go ballistic if she found out this might be a thing. After all the shit she gave me after she and Lauren got together, I can't imagine what she'd do if they ever became a thing. I deserve it after the way I treated her last year, but she would be the first to admit she could go too far sometimes. Way too far. She seems like she's mellowed out more lately, especially after what happened at the party. I am grateful for that, at least.

I wondered how her attitude would change when she finally realizes her girlfriend totally wants to fuck the most popular boy in school.

## Kate

On the ride home from the hospital, Ashley kept going on and on about how Spencer was totally into me and that she was going to set us up. I wanted to tell her I knew she was lying to make me feel better and I didn't believe anything she was saying, but she was at least trying. It did mean a lot to me that she cared. I just wish she wasn't trying to gaslight me into actually thinking someone was into me when they clearly weren't. I don't like catching feelings for people who are taken or into someone else because I know I'll just get hurt in the end.

"And trust me, he'll be slow with you," she went on. "I'll just tell him that you've never had a boyfriend before and he'll be respectful. And if he even thinks of touching you without your permission, he knows I'll cut his balls off."

"How do you know I've never had a boyfriend before?" I asked. She gave me this look that could be perceived as condescending, but I didn't take it that way after I remembered who I was talking to. It's not like she was wrong. I'd never even been kissed before...

"Well... you didn't have to say it like that..."

"There's nothing wrong with being a virgin, you know."

It kinda stung that she was being so blunt. My cheeks went red as tomatoes. Whatever comeback or response I could have hit her with to make her feel like a jerk for instantly going to the idea that I want to have sex with him. "I... well, I mean... I don't even want to have sex yet or anything right now, but..." I juggled the words around in my mind, unsure of whether I should be honest with her.

"I'm sorry," she said, realizing I was uncomfortable a bit too late. "I was just kidding, you know."

"I know, I just..." I sighed. "I don't know. You made it sound weird that I've never... *been*... with someone before."

She shook her head and backtracked. "Trust me, it's not weird at all," she said. "Some people just need to wait for the right one to come along. The person the universe means for them to be with."

I scoffed. "You sound like my mom."

"Well she's right," Ashley said. "Now did you finish your homework or not? We're not getting McDonald's if you don't finish your fractions."

I couldn't be mad at her. She was too nice. I mean she was going out of her way to set me up with a guy we both know normally wouldn't go for someone like me. Spencer Barnett could be with any girl in school. I'm nothing special compared to some girls around there. Michelle blows me out of the water when she blinks.

After she dropped me off, I realized I still had a bunch of homework due tomorrow. *I guess Ashley isn't getting me McDonald's now...* With everything going on, I really didn't care that it wasn't done. I was more worried about everything going on with Spencer and Ashley than my own dumb grades.

Before I could get to work and prioritize what classes mattered more, I got a phone call from Lauren. "Hey, what's up?" I asked.

"I think Beth is going to break up with me."

My eyes widened and I dropped my copy of *Animal Farm* onto my bed, cringing as I watched the pages creasing as they pressed into the mattress. "I'm sorry, what?" I quickly reached for the book and smoothed the pages out before they became too damaged. I hate it when books have creased pages.

"Well, more like we're *going* to break up," she explained. "I don't know who would do it first if it even happens at all but..." She sighed. "I don't know what to do."

“What happened during the car ride?” I asked. Nothing negative happened at the hospital. Not that I saw anyway. *What could have made her reach this point?*

There was a pause. “Shit, my Dad’s home. Look, I can’t talk now ’cause he might hear. Meet me in the cafeteria tomorrow during study hall and we can talk then. I need to try to get some sleep. Night, Kate.” I could barely squeak out a “Yeah, sure, night.” before she hung up on me. I really do love having bombs thrown at me right as I’m settling in for the night.

How was I supposed to try to read a chapter over again for the third time, unable to make myself focus on the backstory of farm animals roleplaying as Soviet Russian politicians, when everyone around me is dealing with such life-altering shit?

## Beth

I could barely sleep the night after we went to see Spencer. Too much on my mind. It was a dirty habit of mine I had to break.

Though the trip had been relatively meaningless in the grand scheme of things, it did show me just how precarious our position was. I needed to hurry things along and get the gears cranking, for lack of a better phrase. Lauren had chosen to be distant during our car ride home from the hospital, leaving me to deal with everything. She even refused my offer to stay over and hook up before I had to get home for bed. I wondered what was wrong with her, but nothing made sense when I thought it out in my mind.

Choosing a spot on the bench that sat in front of the trophy cabinet, I held a book in front of my face and waited. She had to be here sooner or later. Lauren said she was unable to give me a ride so I was forced to take the bus with the rest of the peasants. I hoped I would not miss my opportunity. If I could not catch her before the first bell rang, I would give her time to plan out the meeting before it happened. I needed her to be nervous and off her game for this to work.

A head of curly brown hair stood out from the crowd. I watched as she made her way to locker 339 and entered a combination. Closing the book I had already read a hundred times over, I made my move.

“Hello, Tracy.”

Tracy jumped a little and recoiled at the sound of my voice. You would think that one voice out of the hundreds filling the hallway would not be enough to startle someone. I hate it when people jump and gasp and look all terrified. Just calm down.

“Shit, you scared me...” For some reason, she did not seem too happy to see me.

“I apologize.” She looked nervously around the hallways. “Oh, don’t worry about this being some prank or anything. No one knows I’m still willing to talk to you,” I happily assured her. “Katherine and Lauren still very much hate your guts for what happened.”

She frowned. “Thanks for telling me.”

“If they saw me speaking to you, they might hate me as well,” I admitted. It was a risk worth taking, though. “I’m risking their friendship just being in the same *room* as you. But it’s a risk I’m willing to make. Now then...” I held up the flip phone she had used to take the pictures of us with. “You remember this, right? Oh, come on, of course you do, I don’t know how you couldn’t. I’m sure you’ll be happy to know the pictures are very much deleted so if you would like this back, it’s all yours.”

She made no move to take it. I was glad. It was valuable.

“What do you want, Beth?”

“People ask me that a lot. I have a little speech prepared in my head that I like to recite when I think of what I really want. But right now...” I pointed at her and winked. “I want you. To do me a favor, that is! Because you kinda owe me one after all the shit you’ve pulled.”

The beautiful thing about blackmail is even when someone knows they hate your guts, they cannot risk their own lives by standing up to you and calling your bluff. I would never risk myself or Lauren’s safety by getting back at her, but she does not know that. As far as she knows, I’m willing to burn the school down around me if it means achieving my goals. That comes later, though.

“Alright. Fine. What?” She sounded defeated. Tired. She should sleep more.

“I want to meet who sold you this phone.” I waved it around in the air for emphasis. “And I would like to meet them today. I have business with them.”

The look on her face said it all: whoever this guy is, she doesn't want *anything* to do with. And the thought of the two of us working together? You might as well shoot her now and save herself the trouble later. I was foaming at the mouth at the mere thought of getting a chance to see this boy for myself.

She glared at me and asked, "What do you want from *him*?"

"I just told you," I said. "I have a proposal for him and I would be more than willing to cut you in for your services." I gave her a warm smile. "We *are* partners after all. Right?"

"Fuck you."

I acted startled, placing a hand over my heart. "Language, please."

"You are such a..." She saw people around her turning their heads and immediately retreated back into her shell, unable to stand up for herself. I took this opportunity and went in for the kill shot.

"After everything you did," I quietly whispered with venom dripping from my lips, "you have no room to talk. I'm offering you a chance to do some good around here and make some money and you're going to call *me* dirty names? Go ahead. There is nothing you can say or do that can hurt me. But just know that anything you do to me, I can do so much worse to you. So if you want to be a brat and hold grudges over something *you* started, go ahead and call me a cunt. I can take it."

When she could not so much as bring herself to protest, I knew she was mine once again. Even without the threat of actually being able to do anything, she was still a spineless coward. Her fear was delicious. More addictive than Ashley's cocaine. I craved her submission. This fix was everything I needed to get through the day. If I was tired before, I was wide awake now.

"He's probably outside," she finally said. "By the big tree."

I motioned down the hallway toward the front door. "Shall we? First period is in fifteen minutes."

She shut her locker and led the way without saying another word. I followed closely behind. I was a US Marshall and she was my prisoner. I had to cover my eyes when we exited the school and the sunlight stabbed me in the pupils. As I looked around the campus for some sign of whoever she was talking about, I saw a number of shady-looking individuals coming and going. None of them stood by the tree.

Tracy hung her head as she walked. Before we reached the tree, she turned to me and said, "Just stand back here and let me talk to them." I quietly agreed and she stepped forward.

When she reached the tree, Tracy stopped and waited. I was tempted to ask who she was waiting for, but chose to wait and see. I was afraid of spooking her friend. After about fifteen seconds, I watched as a scrawny kid with a Dallas Mavericks jersey and some ripped up jeans stepped out from between the cars and started walking over to her. Real white trash material. I admit I have never been good at knowing what to do when someone was walking over to talk to me or vice versa so I chose to stare at the grass and pretend I wasn't actually there.

They spoke softly enough that I had to strain to hear them. I could feel them looking back at me as I pretended to not be important. "Shit, Trace, haven't seen you in a while," the pasty boy said with an artificially lowered voice to make him sound the faintest bit like a black man. "Buying or selling?"

"Neither," she responded with a dejected tone. "I need to see Damien."

He glanced over her shoulder and gave me a once-over, stopping for a moment to stare at my chest, before nodding and jogging off. Sufficiently grossed out and full of regret for wearing a shirt that even remotely showed off the top of my chest, I watched as he ran off into the parking lot and disappeared among the beat-up Hondas and Chevys.

If this was the company Tracy kept before becoming a stooge for the popular kids, she really did move up in the world.

A boy in a black trench coat turned the corner and marched over to us. For a moment, I thought I was about to be shot. The victim of the newest instance of gun violence in our fine nation's schools. He looked like he could be the next generation of Dylan and Eric worship porn writers. His short hair held back with far too much product. The thin little mustache that he would be better off shaving. And those eyes that were transfixed on us with a combination of sarcastic glee and piqued interest. I quickly calmed down and put that silly thought out of my mind when I realized his hands were empty and my life was not, in fact, at risk. It was a good thing, too. I still had so much work to do before I was allowed to die.

"Hey there, Tracy," he said softly.

"Hi."

Something about him seemed familiar, but I couldn't quite place it.

"Been a long time, huh?" She meekly nodded, her eyes wandering to avoid his. Seeing she was not interested in reconnecting with an old friend, he continued on. "Who's your friend?"

I noticed that he did not so much as look at me when he spoke to her. Taking the initiative, I stepped forward and extended my hand. "My name is Bethany Hill. It's good to meet you... I'm sorry, Tracy never told me your name."

He looked down at my hand as if it were a viper. Then he laughed hard in my face and gave me a little sideways high-five. "Oh, damn! You got yourself the new Vice President as a friend now! Shit, I thought you lucked out when you said you was the quarterback's little secretary, but just look at you now!" He looked back at me and asked, "Whatchu got her doing now? Head of the Prom Committee?"

*I knew I recognized him. Of course it had to be this guy. Grace told me all about him. He lived up to expectations, and then some. Of all the people I was going to fuck with, it was the one guy who could actually ruin Lauren's Presidency. But we needed to do this.*

"Oh, we aren't friends, I can assure you of that," I said with pure honesty, brushing my conflicted feelings regarding working with him aside. I believe shock and awe to be a suitable tactic when dealing with this kind of person. I find it kind of funny because I saw a lot of myself in someone like this. A self-admitted cockroach who would do anything to survive in this fucked up awful world and manage to come out on top. But that's where the comparisons end. Damien is someone who does not respect their betters and sees life as a big, stupid joke. I hoped I made it thoroughly plain to see that I was not joking here.

As predicted, this took him aback a little. "Then what are you doing here?"

"I asked her to introduce me to you. I was hoping we could speak about a proposal I have for you."

"You wanna get married?" He perked right back up, pretending he never lost his cool a second before. "Look, I'm flattered and you're cute and all, but I'm just not looking for that kind of commitment right now."

I smiled. It took all of ten seconds of knowing him on a personal level to understand exactly why Tracy hated this guy so much. For once, I regretted my decision to blackmail someone. At the same time, however, I figured I could work with this. Any slimy little worm such as this has to be weak to something. My guess was his weakness is the almighty dollar.

"When do you have lunch today?" I asked.

"Middle of third period."

“Excellent! I also have that lunch.” It was a lie. I would just fake period cramps to get out of class. It would not be the first time and it will not be the last. “Where can I meet you?”

“I eat outside,” he answered. “Down by the baseball field. The greenhouse door is unlocked and Ms. Kendall doesn’t have a class. I don’t like eating around people.”

“Well then I hope you can suck it up for one afternoon because we have a lot to go over.” I turned to Tracy. “Would you like to join us?”

“No,” she answered somewhat sternly, and rudely. She finally decided to grow a pair for the first time all day. “I don’t want any part in whatever this is.”

“Suit yourself. Shall we go?” Tracy nodded and headed back to the school while I followed close behind. I gave Damien one last wink and a smile. “It was nice to meet you. I like your trench coat.”

I had to hurry to catch up to Tracy as she power-walked away. I got the sense she was very unhappy with me. I wanted to break the tension. “You have interesting friends.”

“He’s not my friend.”

“Trouble in paradise, perhaps?”

She stopped dead in her tracks and gave me the harshest look I could have imagined from her. “I don’t know what you want with him, but leave me the fuck out of it. We’re even now. You won, it’s *over*. Fuck off and *never* speak to me again.”

I realized I was taking a step backwards when I nearly tripped over a crack in the sidewalk. Seeing her actually lash out and not retreat back into her shell when confronted was actually shocking. She is not an intimidating person by any means, but everyone has a breaking point that turns them into blood-thirsty monsters. “Okay. You’re right. It’s over.”

She wasted no time leaving me in her dust. It was for the best. She was still useful in a way, but I knew it was better to give her some space right now. But she will be back in the fold, whether she likes it or not. For now, though, I had bigger fish to fry.

## Lauren

The night before the bake sale was such a mess. I know it's stupid to be so worried about a school bake sale, but this was my first real school thing as the Student Council President. This thing matters to me. I didn't want to be known as the one who screwed up the first time she got to be in charge of something all by herself. O'Reilly and a couple other teachers and parents would supervise us, but O'Reilly said that I would hold the reins on this one. Something bad happens, it's on me.

I couldn't let myself screw this up.

I may have been the one person in all of Arlington City High to skip the football game that Friday, but I didn't care. I had too much to do. I was on and off the phone all Friday evening talking to people to coordinate the bake sale. Making sure everyone actually bothered to bring something to their table was such a pain in the ass. I was exhausted after spending so much time with Spencer, but it was worth it.

The French Club wanted to make crepes, but O'Reilly was really nervous about any of us spoiled brats playing with literal fire. The Cheerleaders were a mess without Ashley ordering people around so trying to get Stacey and Elena to promise they'd actually get the girls to bring anything was a nightmare. The head of the Chess Club wanted us to buy little dark and white chocolates shaped like chess pieces from this one luxury candy website and I had to carefully explain to him that we can't afford to do that for one club and in the most polite way possible say that it's a dumb idea that would lose us money.

I'm shocked I didn't down an entire bottle of aspirin just to deal with the migraine.

Ashley made sure to help as best she could, but she was also worried about Homecoming so she couldn't do as much as she'd wanted to help us. I felt really bad about stretching her so thin with request after request. She was dealing with so much. I wanted to help her more, but I couldn't bring myself to do anything. It had been months since we broke up and I still couldn't bring myself to open up to her about what happened.

Beth stepped up to make things easier for me whenever I would ask her, but in this case she was extremely unhelpful. Annoyingly unhelpful, really. I'd call her once every couple hours to see if she needed anything from me and she would just tell me that she had it covered.

"Don't worry about it, babe," she cooed, "I'll take care of everything. Just worry about the other clubs."

Naturally, I was concerned. Not just for myself, though.

We needed to make enough money to help fund the clubs so that we wouldn't need to go to the boosters with our hats in our hands to beg for pennies. They'd give it to us, obviously, but O'Reilly thought it was good to teach us some hard work and not rely on others for money. Douchebag thinks we're all going to survive off of unemployment for the rest of our lives and we can't earn our own money.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "We could meet up after dinner and go over everything together." I wasn't asking her to do everything herself. I just wanted her to tell me what she was planning on doing.

"I know a guy who wants to help us," she said calmly. "He's going to buy a bunch of food and make sure we get the money we need."

"Who is he?" I asked.

"A friend of my Dad's. He's like an uncle to me. Just trust me, I've got this covered." She hung up shortly after. She didn't even say she loved me.

The only thing I could think to do was panic call Kate. She was the only one I could think of who would listen *and* already knew about me and Beth, except maybe Ashley but that was not a can of worms



I wanted to open at that moment in time. I didn't need to add any more stress trying to get someone else involved in all of this. Michelle would probably listen, but I just wasn't ready...

Kate barely had time to pick up the phone before I blurted out the first thing that popped into my head. "I think Beth is going to break up with me."

My dad came home early. We made plans to talk about it during study hall the next day. I could barely sleep that night knowing there was a chance I was going to be alone again.

## Kate

The second Lauren walked into study hall, she motioned for me to sit with her on the far side of the room. Normally teachers don't mind when we talk during study hall, so long as we aren't too loud, but Mrs. Upton was a total stickler for her self-imposed rule of no talking in her study hall. People called Mrs. Uptight for a reason. If we were going to talk, we'd have to be extremely quiet. Given what we were talking about, though, it's not like we were going to scream it at the top of our lungs for the whole room to hear.

We waited a minute or two after the second bell to ring and Mrs. Upton took attendance. Frank, Dwayne, and Tom showed up a minute late and Mrs. Upton gave them each demerits. She really lived up to her name that day. Jerk.

After all the excitement died down and she went to start grading papers, we dropped our voices to a whisper so we wouldn't end up like the guys. "So what's going on?" I asked.

"Okay so I, uh... I think I *may* have overreacted a little last night..." She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She leaned on her elbow. "I made a mistake."

I figured I knew exactly where this was going. The question I had was who. "Wait, hold on, did you... you know... cheat on her?"

"Well, no... but I kinda caught feelings for someone."

I felt the corners of my mouth begin to twitch and I couldn't hold it in. "Look, Lauren, I'm flattered, but I'm not interested in you in that way."

She cracked a smile as well. "I'm sure you would be an amazing girlfriend, but thank you for letting me down gently."

Thank God she found that funny. She looked like she needed a laugh.

"So who is it?" I asked, the anticipation killing me. "Is it..." I looked around to see if anyone was listening in. Satisfied nobody else could hear us, I went on. "Is it Ashley? I saw you looking at her a couple times back in the hospital."

She shook her head. "No, trust me, that ship sailed. But, like..." She sighed. "Part of me still loves her. As fucked as that is."

"It's not fucked. You two were really close. You can't just shut off your heart."

"No," she said as she ran her finger across the table in little circles. "I guess you can't."

"So who is it?"

She exhaled sharply, preparing herself to admit it. "Spencer..."

It took me a few seconds to process who she was talking about. Of all the people I could have imagined it could have been, I never would have suspected it would have been him. They used to be friends, but they drifted apart when they got to high school and he started hanging out with the football players and she joined the cheerleaders and volleyball team. Sure, they hung out a lot but I never realized they had enough time to be intimate enough to develop those kinds of feelings.

At the same time, I knew it all along. I just couldn't admit it to myself. The way she was smiling and staring at him all afternoon, laughing at every little thing he said. I was just in denial. I thought that after all my waiting and praying that I would finally get thrown a bone. That maybe, just maybe a guy like that would finally *want* to be with me.

And after all my hoping and dreaming, I ended up playing second fiddle to Lauren Bradshaw once again. I was never going to be President. Not with Lauren running against me. I was never going to

get the boy. Not with Lauren being hot and popular. I was never going to get anything I wanted if I was always in her shadow.

Part of me wanted to give her some real shitty advice. Remind her how much Beth loves her and that it would break her heart if she heard this. Maybe even suggest Beth might hurt herself if Lauren even considered cheating on her. Lauren was so kind and caring, I knew she would drop everything to make sure Beth was okay. Whatever little issues they were having would be fixed in an instant if Lauren thought she would lose her.

All it would take to bring her back to Earth and show her that she can't have everything she wants is just one little exaggerated lie...

That was the second, the exact moment, I realized how awful of a person I was. Like the reality of how much of a cruel, uncaring bitch I am finally dawned on me. I really believed I was *owed* a boy I was into like he was a library book that everyone wanted to borrow and it was my turn on the list. I thought I would win a popularity contest just because I put up a poster. It wasn't because I wanted to have sex with him or anything. That was the exact last thing on my mind. I was just so pathetic and alone and I thought I had a chance with a guy way out of my league because he smiled at me once.

I actually hated Lauren for a few seconds because I was jealous. I hated her. I felt evil. Pure evil. This was the second time I let my own insecurity nearly destroy her life just for my own satisfaction.

*What is wrong with me?*

A figure stopped in front of our table. We looked up and saw Mrs. Upton standing over us, a grim look on her face. "Are you two working on homework?" We said nothing. "Then either stay quiet or separate. If you want to end up like those bums over there then keep it up. I hear Saturday detention is quite fun."

God, she had such a punchable face.

After she left, we stayed silent. It was for the best. I had no advice for Lauren. Nothing I could say would help. I was too busy kicking the shit out myself and my disgusting ego to tell her what was right and wrong. I wasn't even sure what was right and wrong anymore. She would have to figure this one out for herself. As much as it pained me to leave her hanging, I had to figure my own shit out. I knew I would need help and I knew exactly who to go to.

## Beth

To his credit, Damien actually bothered to show up. His lack of enthusiasm managed to convince me that he might ditch our scheduled meeting to go smoke cigarettes with his posse of wannabe gangsters. But he did show up in the end and we got right to business.

“Thank you for meeting me.” I gave him the best fake smile I could. Any human resources representative would be so proud of my manufactured enthusiasm.

“Sure,” he slowly responded, cautiously looking around the campus. “So what is this, some kinda prank or something? Are there cameras hidden around here? Is O’Reilly waiting in the bushes?” He took a step towards the shrubs and waved. “James? *Jimmy*? You in there?”

“Very cute,” I said, allowing him a moment to entertain himself. “I can assure you this is all strictly under the table. And no, O’Reilly didn’t put me up to this if you’re worried about being caught or me turning you in. I’m here on my own.”

“Alright, sure. So what’s going on?”

I immediately pulled the burner phone out of my pocket. I had kept it close for just such an occasion. “Recognize this?”

He tried to act cool and disinterested, but I could tell he knew exactly what that was. Tracy might have been one of the poorer kids in our class, but she made sure to wave around that new iPhone she used to take notes on when she was playing Secretary for Spencer and all those other assholes at assemblies and dances and stuff. One glance and his eyes betrayed him just long enough that I knew I had him.

“What? Why would I recognize a flip phone?”

“Because you sold it to Tracy,” I reminded him. “Or maybe you gave it to her as a gift. I don’t know, it really doesn’t matter how she got it. But what *does* matter is you have more and I would like to buy.”

He relaxed a little when the promise of money entered the picture, though I could tell he still was cautious. “Well, shit, why didn’t you just ask this morning?”

“Because you wouldn’t sell to a total stranger. I’m not an idiot, I know what kind of... *operation* you run around here.”

It was a bit of an open secret among people in the know (AKA anyone but the goodie-goodies who would squeal to O’Reilly for a pat on the back) that Damien Wells was the school’s personal black market dealer. Some people say he was on par with The Hustler Kid from the old kid’s show called Recess, but after doing some research I could tell that Damien blew that kid out of the water. When Grace first told me about him, I decided it was best to stay away. He sounded way too sketchy.

But she was gone. And he was here. And I needed him.

What set Damien apart from his cartoon counterpart is he was known for selling a variety of illegal goods that are popular among high schoolers. Sure, he had the normal stuff any high school black market would sell: candy bars, pop, other junk food he probably stole from the local gas stations and supermarkets. But he also had the good shit people paid serious coin for. From cigarettes to vape cartridges to a little bit of weed if you become really close with him, he had whatever a sixteen year old with some lunch money could ask for.

What really set him apart from the cool twenty-something neighbor who slid you and your friend a couple bottles of beer every once and a while is Damien was also known as the guy who people had all of the recycled papers a kid could ask for. Old quizzes, book reports, even a midterm or two from the really lazy teachers who never updated their tests, Damien had it all. Some people say he only gets away

with it because he has a “system.” Whatever that means. It was a puzzle I intended to solve throughout our new relationship.

The only reason I never approached him before was the fact that you need to be introduced to him before buying or selling anything. There is a bit of a vetting process that needs to be followed before you’re actually allowed to meet with him. Xavier Brendel, one of Charles’ yes-men from last year, was the talk of the school for a week when he was seen trying to schmooze his way into meeting with Damien and getting absolutely denied by Damien’s little posse. It was quite embarrassing. Charles was gone by then so he was unable to set his old friend straight. Tracy was my ticket in. She served her purpose and she was now officially of no use to me. Perhaps I could use her as collateral down the line if Damien steps out of line, but that was a matter for another day.

For now, I was focused on this little rat. If I got him on my side, we would be set.

“And if you do me a favor,” I continued, “I’ll do you a favor as well.”

That amused him in more ways than one. I felt physically repulsed when I watched his eyes lock onto my chest for just long enough to get a good look while simultaneously not thinking he would be noticed. The Venn Diagram of the two outcomes had a nice little picture of his stupid greasy head right in the center. He leaned forward and smiled at me when he was done staring.

“Oh yeah? Alright, I’ll bite. What’s in it for me?”

“Don’t you wanna know what I’m going to ask before you just agree to it?” I asked. “I thought you were a professional.” He gave a relenting nod and motioned for me to continue. “You ever make weed brownies?”

He snorted a little. “I thought this was about cell phones?”

“I have the money in my pocket for them, but we can worry about that later. But back to what I was asking, do you? Because you once sold pot to Grace Carlisle and she said you were the guy to go to if I ever wanted some. Well... I want some. Preferably in the form of brownies.”

He did not look very happy to hear someone mention Grace’s name. She was still a sore subject around school. If there were some underlying issues with them or it was just him losing a valuable customer, he was not going to tell me. He knew we were friends, which I think everybody knew considering I was the only person she ever seemed to hang out with around school, but we were not exactly on the level to talk about her together just yet. If that ever happened at all, that is.

“So let me get this straight,” he began, “you went through all the trouble of meeting me just so you could get weed brownies... You’re telling me *none* of your friends know how to make them? None of the popular kids hand them out at Spencer’s parties?”

“I could go to them if I really wanted,” I admitted. “But I don’t need them to know. This is our little secret.”

“If this isn’t for your friends and... forgive me for assuming, but you don’t seem like the type who uses any kinda pot, then who are they for?” he asked.

I pulled a folded up piece of paper from my pocket and handed it to him. He unfolded it and gave it a once over before glancing back up at me. “Seriously?”

“I know it sounds silly—” I started to say before he cut me off by throwing the crumpled up piece of paper back at my face.

“Nuh-uh. No. Absolutely not.”

I playfully frowned at him. “You *really* don’t want to make some serious money?”

“I don’t fuck with school stuff,” he warned. “No dances, no assemblies, no bake sales. And you shouldn’t either.”

Now it was my turn to play the stern little goodie-goodie. “No school stuff? Don’t bullshit me, you’re the guy who sells old tests to Freshmen that just want to eat Fritos and jerk off all day instead of studying.” He only glared at me. I could tell I needed to fix this fast before it went to shit. “Are you worried you’re going to get caught?”

“No, I’m worried *you* are gonna get caught. *I* wouldn’t be in the city when shit goes down and they start breaking out the drug sniffing dogs and SWAT teams. And you know how I know something will happen? It’s because somebody would talk. Somebody always talks.”

“Christ, are you always so overdramatic?” I shook my head. “You have nothing to worry about. It would only be me.”

He glared at me. “You’re going to be a drug dealer at a school bake sale?”

“Why not?” I took out the cash from my pocket and played with it in my hands to show I meant business.

Despite his obvious concerns, he actually thought it over. People become needy when they see the reward before them. It’s why merchants in markets let you feel the wares before you buy them. Gets you all attached and unable to put it down. A wannabe-hustler like this only looks for what’s in it for him. I was offering a straight one-on-one deal where he gets to keep all the profits. I saw this as a win-win.

After much internal debate, his deadly sins took over and he gave in. “What’s in it for me?”

“Besides all of this,” I said while flourishing my little wad of cash, “I had a few ideas in mind.” This was my one chance. I needed to become the best saleswoman in history.

“Such as?”

“How would you like to become the Student Council Treasurer?”

What came out of his mouth wasn’t so much a laugh as it was an outburst of confusion and astonishment. Like what I said was the most incomprehensibly funny thing he had ever heard. A truly befuddled cackle. When he laughed, some spit shot out of his mouth and landed in the middle of the table. I watched the little droplets land, my emotionless smile lingering on my lips despite my inner disgust at the sight of the spittle.

“Okay now come on, be serious. Why would *I* want to be the treasurer?” he asked through his laughter as a single tear streamed down his face.

I took out the third and final surprise I had prepared. After unzipping my purse, I undid the little button on my wallet and held it up into the sunlight so the glare would catch his greedy little eye. “Recognize this?”

He frowned mid-laugh, the joy still fresh in his mind. “Uh... no? Your credit card?”

“The Student Council MasterCard.” My smile turned to a grin. “All purchases paid for by the Arlington School District.”

“I just told you I don’t fuck with school stuff. If I buy something with that—”

I was the one laughing now. A single little chortle of delight to throw him off his game. “Do you think I’m a fucking moron? I’d never let *you* have the school card. I’m saying you become the Treasurer because you would tell me exactly what you intended to buy and I would tell you when it was safe to do it. Nobody would be any bit the wiser and we could spend the money as we see fit while justifying the expenses as being part of school events. And Lauren and I are planning *a lot* of events this year.”

“But wouldn’t they be able to track any of the purchases?” he asked. “They could see where I go and put the dots together.”

“We would withdraw cash from the account and you or I would pay in cash,” I said. “If O’Reilly ever said anything, we could just say I am related to someone who has an employee discount that requires

payment in cash or would require giving them the card to buy it while I'm at school. Much safer that way. It's not like they would let a total stranger take a card with access to an account with thousands of dollars in it. And how can they track anything we pay for in cash at all?"

"Yeah. I guess that would work." He narrowed his eyes. "Why are you offering to do this? We don't even know each other and you're literally giving me the entire student council budget to play with. *Why?*"

I chuckled. "That's not *exactly* how this works. Remember what I said? You would run your purchases by me and I would give the okay to withdraw that much cash. But it's pretty simple, really. You have a service I want and it carries a lot of risk. I have money, which you obviously want, and am willing to pay for the risk. If we work together, we'd be unstoppable."

"And Tracy knows about this?"

"Oh, God, no, not at all." The thought of her being involved any more than was needed was mortifying. "We are absolutely not friends. She just owed me one. Nothing more."

He grimaced. "Do I have to join student council? Sit in that room with those people?"

That was even more terrifying than the idea of myself and Tracy being friends. One whiff of my involvement with a total skeeze like this and Lauren would mount my head on the wall. "No," I firmly stated. "Like I said, it's you and I working together and nobody else has to know. I don't need you to be our actual Treasurer, per say. I need someone who is good with money and will do exactly what I say, when I say it."

"Glad I can be your bitch. Okay, just humor me for a second here...why not do it yourself then? Like seriously, why go to all this trouble just to have someone spend money that you can spend by yourself with no risk of being caught or seen with me?"

"It's always nice to have a second opinion on financial matters," I said. "And I need someone to talk me out of just draining the budget and running off every now and then." I nearly admitted who I would take with me if given the chance, but that is a story for another day.

*Not soon enough...*

He gave me his best Josh Holloway grin (Grace got me into Lost last year) and bowed his head. Some girl might have found him attractive in a bad boy kinda way. I am not that kind of girl. "Well, gee, when you put it that way, how can I refuse?"

"Do we have a deal?" I flaunted the wad of cash once again for insurance. It hurt to be losing all of this money, but I needed this. Plus the extra phones would come in handy eventually. He nodded and reached over to take it.

"Give me your number and I'll tell you where to go to get your phones," he said. Then he smirked at me once again with those eyes I know all too well from boys who see me as nothing more than a piece of meat waiting to be eaten. "Or you can come over to my place and pick them up yourself."

"As tempting as that sounds," I said, trying ever so hard to let him down gently, "I'd rather just give you my number. It's written on the front of the bill on the bottom of the stack. Please erase it when you get it. It's in pencil."

He checked to see if I was telling the truth. "Huh. Look at that. How many you need?"

"Just one. I already have two, but I could use an extra."

He nodded and stuffed the cash into his pocket. "Alright. Anything else?"

"Yes," I answered. "I need to get a hold of a few phone numbers."

## Lauren

Spencer was really supportive of everything I was dealing with. We ended up texting all night after I got home and more the next morning. I told him I wished he could be here, if for no other reason than for moral support. The football team was being dragged out to help us with the bake sale. They got killed the day before so everybody was going to be pissed. That's not what I was upset about, though. Even though everybody had their suspicions about Brad after Spencer kicked the shit out of him, they still made him be a part of this in the name of team bonding or some shit. The first thing I did when I got in was I make sure to keep Ashley as far away from that rat fucker as possible.

While Spencer was texting me and giving me advice based on what he and Ashley had done the year before when they had to do the bake sale, which just translated to what Tracy did while Kara and Ashley "supervised," Beth was almost completely radio silent. She texted me back twice before we arrived at campus and that was it.

Beth: *"Don't worry about it, I've got everything covered."*

Beth: *"I'll be there in ten minutes. I need to meet with my friend first."*

She never spoke about who her friend was. I trusted her more than anyone in the world, but why was she being so quiet about everything?

Ashley, Kate, and the rest of Student Council were there when I arrived, save Michelle who was driving down to New Orleans with her family for her birthday. It was no big deal in the long run, though. We had more than enough people to run things without her and, thankfully for me, Ashley took charge and made sure people were prepping for the day. Tables were set up and the food was spread out for people to buy. Seeing her back in action was really cool. I was really glad to see she was doing better.

We spent nearly an hour prepping the event before Beth even showed up. She had gotten an Uber and was struggling to carry entire shopping bags full of Tupperware. Inside were all kinds of baked goods. Cookies, slices of pie, brownies, some single slices of cake.

"Sorry I'm so late," she said. "My mom's car broke down and I had to get a ride."

"I wish you would have called," I meekly said while taking some of the bags. I didn't want to sound nosey or pushy, but she should have asked for help. She didn't respond.

The whole point of the bake sale was for the various clubs and teams to raise money for themselves. Basically earn the right to exist at school. Each club or team would be given a table around the main building and parents, students, faculty, and pretty much anyone else with money could come in and support their favorites or the parents support their kids or whatever. Then at the end of the day, we pool the money together and Student Council would set the budgets for everyone with whatever we earned.

There is no physical way to make that any less stupid than it sounds.

Even I knew the system was broken because you could be the best club ever and still end up losing half your earnings to the Chess Club or Mathletes who earned a fraction of what you did. Continuous hits to the state's education budget left us to basically fend for ourselves and this was one of the answers. The Debate Team went to Nationals last year and they could be facing a cut to their budget so bad that they might not be able to afford the bus this year. We have no say over it, though, and I knew I was going to be the bad guy when it came to setting budgets for everyone. Musical was already being projected to lose a third of what it had last year and that was already too low for them to do much of anything. Victoria and Jasmine were gonna be pissed.

*The price of being in charge, I guess...*



Beth and I set the food down beside the Student Council table. We chose to put it beside the door to our office to seem a little bit more official. Half the clubs in the school had to double up on where they organized so having a room to ourselves was quite nice. You'd think a school that could support thousands of students could afford to fit a club in every room, but you'd be wrong. In reality, we don't really *need* a table since we end up getting all the money at the end of the day to decide on budgets, but we figured something was better than nothing. Who could say no to the Student Council President, right?

"Soooo," I said as I helped set up the table, "you never told me who your friend was." I glanced over at her to see how she'd react to this friend being brought up.

"He'll be around," Beth lazily answered as she tucked her backpack under the table.

"So it's a *he*," I said playfully. I gave her a little smirk to lighten the mood and show her I wasn't really mad over the whole being late thing. "Should I be jealous?"

She looked up at me and gave me the same look she'd have given to someone who just asked her why the sun sets every morning. "No? Why would you be jealous?"

"Nevermind."

The football team was basically forced to be part of this. The normal protocol for when the school is hosting some big event, like the bake sale or SATs, they'd be forced to stay home the next morning. Spencer said the day they lucked out when they won a game last year that happened the day before the school was going to be filled with people taking their SATs and they physically couldn't have practice because they might disturb everyone testing. He said they'd never been happier than when Coach Mullens told them all to stay home as a reward for winning.

This year, though, he sang a different song. In light of their star quarterback quitting, their star linebacker getting curb stomped and accused of rape, and their program basically falling apart without Spencer to lead them, Coach Mullens decided they needed to have some teambuilding exercises to get the band back together.

The choice was simple: serve slices of apple pie at nine in the morning on a Saturday or run hills until you threw up.

Between being forced to come into school on a Saturday morning and after suffering another morale-crippling loss less than twelve hours earlier, I could tell they were in a shitty mood. Even though I wasn't there, I got updates from Ashley and Kate. They ended up losing 47-16. Not having Spencer was really killing them. At this point, they were all but doomed to miss the playoffs and everyone knew it.

Frank, Tom, and Dwayne met us at the Student Council table to be given assignments. They were the team leaders so they got to serve as my personal little worker bees while me and Ash took care of the rest. Brad should have been with them, but Frank told him to stay far away from me. I can't complain.

"Tom, you and your guys are going to monitor the academic clubs," I said. "Dwayne, your guys've got the sports teams. And Frank, you—"

"Make sure everyone is doing their jobs and not sneaking off to get high behind the school." Frank sounded like a zombie.

He might be an ass, but he's our ass.

After they broke off, I asked Frank to stay back for a second so I could ask him a favor. "Make sure Brad doesn't go anywhere near the front door until this is over. If he needs to go to his car, call me and wait for the okay."

Ashley was posted at the sign-in booth near the main office. She was tasked with directing everyone to the booths they wanted to see. Ever since the intervention, she was dead-set on proving she's valuable around there. I didn't know if it's because she was trying to bury herself in work or if she's

trying to get back with me or what, but she was working so hard. I was really proud of her. Needless to say, I was not letting that motherfucker anywhere near her. Frank understood.

The Student Council table was occupied by the most important members: myself, Beth, and Kate. Casey was working with Ashley up by the front doors and the Class Reps got to choose which clubs or teams they'd be working at. Their choices usually revolved around getting to spend time with their friends. I didn't care. As long as we made some money, they could do cartwheels through the hallways for all I cared. My biggest fear was begging O'Reilly and the boosters for a handout. That would have been the most embarrassing thing ever.

"How'd you get so much food?" Kate asked while scanning the table Beth had neatly arranged based on food type, price, and portion size. It was all very official.

Beth shrugged. "My friend's mom owns a bakery."

This only confused and infuriated me more, but I didn't let her know I was getting annoyed. I don't know any of her friends with a family that owned a bakery. Hell, I don't even know any of her other *friends*. As far as I know, I'm the only person she ever really talks to. I couldn't tell if this was her *friend* she mentioned in the text or if this was someone else or if I was just overreacting or what.

Everyone was supposed to bring their own food from home so it wasn't like nobody else went to their friend's mom's bakery the day before to stock up on leftovers for the sale. She wasn't the only one to bring a small feast. Was I just overreacting for nothing?

On the other hand, she and I were supposed to bring food from my house. She ended up ditching me to get her own ride with a text ten minutes before she said she was going to be at my house to say she wouldn't be there.

Why can't she just open up to me? We're supposed to be a couple. I love her so bad, it hurts. I would tell her my deepest, darkest secrets on a whim. Did she even love me? Is this my punishment for getting a dumb crush on Spencer? I couldn't lose her. I can't be alone again.

## Ashley

If there was one thing that really pissed me off the day of the bake sale, it was who was forced to work there. Even though Lauren told me that they were going to keep him far away from me, I knew he was there. Lurking. I could run into him at any point during the day while I was walking alone through the hallways. You would think the school would want to keep us as far apart as physically possible because of all the gossip going around, but you'd be wrong.

It wasn't just the bake sale either. We would pass each other in the hallways every day and the whole school waited with bated breath to see if he would try to finish what he started or if I finally snapped and would try to slit his throat with my protractor. As badly as I wanted to try, it would never work. He was too tall to get a good swipe at.

The most the school did to "protect me" was move me out of the one class I had with him after the allegations came out, but that was it. Nothing else was done. Coach Mullens didn't even make him stay away from the bake sale. And while I was slowly dying inside, people got to talk and we were instructed to keep as far away from each other as possible to prevent anything "upsetting" from happening. O'Reilly's words.

A surprising amount of people came to the school to go junk food shopping. Goes to show just how far some people will go to help their alma mater. Or stop their hearts. Same difference. I heard a story about a head cheerleader pimping out her squad to raise more money back in the 90's. I cannot confirm this ever happened, but I wouldn't put it past someone to actually do it. That kind of shit would never fly with me in charge. I can't say the same for Stacey and Elena.

I was keeping myself as busy as humanly possible as the greeter at the information desk, but the thought that he was there lingered in the back of my mind. I can't even remember that night and it still sickens me whenever I think about waking up the next morning. I feel kind of safe at school because there are thousands of people between us, but now the school is half-empty and I could run into him at any moment if I leave my chair.

I promised I wouldn't let it get to me. And it didn't.

## Beth

The most difficult part of the exchange was waiting for a moment when Lauren and Katherine would be indisposed at the same time. As the three highest ranking members of Student Council, we had the honor of representing the club while our subordinates were tasked with managing the twenty other clubs on the ground level. I only had two people to avoid and they were sitting right beside me with no intention of moving.

Damien had texted me about leaving the backpack somewhere to be picked up by one of, and I quote, “his guys.” I shot that suggestion down immediately. How he runs his black market bullshit is his business, but I handle my business transactions personally so I can meet the people I intend to work with. Given the contents of this deal, I was not letting that backpack out of my sight. I weighed the risk that he may turn me in for some brownie points (pun intended) with O’Reilly in the event his operation was uncovered and the threat of criminal charges were floated to get him to sell me out. He had been able to avoid detection thus far, but I was still going to remain cautious until I learned the extent of his business model.

The plan was simple: hand off the backpack to Damien personally or one of “his guys” and they handle sales behind the school. There was a blind spot between the annex building and the brick wall stretching the length of the football stadium where no cameras could see. Nobody should be hanging around there this time of day so it was the perfect place to bring people to sell them the brownies.

While I was making sure Lauren’s day went by without a hitch, Damien and his goons would keep themselves busy making us both rich. We would never need to be seen around each other for the duration of the bake sale. It was perfect.

In the meantime, I would direct the potential customers to the AV Club table for information on where to go. The code phrase: “*Yeah, I’m just really hungry, you know?*” Simple, yet effective. People do get hungry at bake sales, after all. The AV Club was specially chosen because Damien ran it. He could make sure no one else was at the table to suspect him.

It was quite an ingenious plan on my part, if I may be so bold.

The real issue was getting rid of Katherine and Lauren. A few ideas on how to deal with them floated around in my mind as we waited for the doors to open. I could sense Lauren was upset about something so I attempted to give her some space. Asking her to perform a task far away from me was the best option for the sake of both the handoff and our relationship. Katherine, meanwhile, just wanted to do a good job so getting her away from me would be easy.

I waited until the doors were open and the parents began to file in. I tried to keep my interest low so as to not arouse suspicion from the other girls, but I studied the faces of everyone that passed. Damien texted me as we waited and said he was sending Benny Martinez to pick up the backpack. I knew Benny from my math class last year, but we never really spoke.

Benny arrived about a half-hour after the event began and lingered down the hallway, pretending to check his locker. We made eye contact and I knew to make my move. The only problem was he got there too early and I still had yet to get rid of the girls.

That was when I realized I made an error that would be the perfect excuse to separate us.

“Hey Katherine, can you do me a favor?” I asked, breaking the silence. It had been almost five minutes since someone came near our table so they were just sitting around on their phones in the meantime. “I just realized I forgot to bring this roll of the raffle tickets to the gym. Would you mind bringing them to Victoria and Jasmine for me?”

We had some big raffle going on with themed gift baskets for the wine moms to gawk over. Lauren asked Victoria and Jasmine to run things in there. They were incredibly charming and pretty so all the old people would be climbing over themselves to buy a chance at some Ritz Crackers and a coupon for a day spa. They had things covered without us but after a suggestion from myself, Lauren said they would get some help from some of the football players.

"Yeah, sure," she said. "No problem." She took the roll of tickets from underneath the table and set off for the gym. I bought myself about three to five minutes to get rid of Lauren. More if Katherine stuck around to talk to her new popular colleagues. My guess is she would because she wanted to stretch her legs. It was way too early for this.

Now it was just me and my beloved.

Unfortunately, she spoke up before I could ask her to kindly leave me alone to participate in my first drug deal. "Hey, Beth," Lauren said softly. "Can we talk?"

This was not the time for a heart-to-heart. I had things to do to make her life a whole hell of a lot easier. But more than anything, I wanted to make her happy and talking is kind of required for a relationship to work. So despite my reservations, I sucked up my frustration with choosing *now* of all times to want to chat.

"Yeah, of course," I answered. "What's going on?"

"Are you okay?" she asked. She lowered her voice as some parents passed us by, paying us no mind. "You've been kinda worrying me lately."

"What? Why? What'd I do?"

"Nothing!" she promised. "But, like, I mean... you've been really distant with me lately... and you've been *really* angry—"

"Angry?" I butted in. "When have I been angry?"

"Okay, maybe not *angry*," she backtracked, "but... bitter. Resentful. Like something is going on and you're blocking everyone else out. It worries me a little, you know?"

I could tell where this is coming from. Despite not enjoying the rare times we spoke about her relationship with Ashley, she did fill me in on the details of what it was like to be dating a drug addict whose vices were overtaking her personal life. Toward the end of the school year, she had been ignoring almost everyone besides Kara Alderman. They were inseparable— for better or worse— and instead of having cozy dates every Saturday at one of their houses like they'd been doing every week, Ashley was going to more and more parties.

One night when she was feeling particularly emotional after we had sex, Lauren confided in me that she never wanted to believe her girlfriend could be an addict, but it was becoming harder and harder to ignore. And before she knew it, they were broken up and that was the end of that.

"I'm not trying to block you out. I love you. You know that."

She held my hand under the table. "I know. I do, too. And that's why I'm worried about you. You've been taking things way too seriously lately. Like the election? You were like a completely different person during that. An-and you've been cutting me out of decisions and plans and not talking to me when I try to reach out to you and it feels like I'm just... I don't know... along for the ride right now. Does that make sense?"

She was right. I can't lie, I had been becoming distant with her. It was so hard to be so close to someone again so soon after what happened. I would never tell her that to her face, but we went way too fast too soon after we became single. I will never say I regretted doing it, but we just weren't emotionally ready to be with someone else.

But the more important thing is I knew that we were meant to be together. Things apparently happen for a reason and I had never been happier than when I was with her. I just wish she could see that I was just trying to protect her. This was not her cross to bear and I would not risk her wellbeing when I could shoulder the load perfectly fine on my own. One way or another, she would have to understand.

"I know it's been... a lot. And I know I get really carried away sometimes. Especially with Ashley. I know I've been a massive bitch to her. But I'm going to change. I promise. And I promise I will be more open with you going forward."

She smiled her perfect smile. I could feel the trust emanating from her. "Thank you."

It was time to make my move. I looked up and down the hallway, careful to avoid looking at Benny. "It's been pretty slow, huh?" Only two people had bought snacks from us so far.

"Yeah, I guess so. But it's only... what? Not even ten. We'll make the money we need."

"Oh, I know we will. With how good this apple pie is? People are going to be lining up to get it before it's gone." She and I laughed. "Hey, I've got an idea. Maybe you can go check in on Ashley up front," I suggested. "Make sure she's doing alright."

"I'm sure she's okay," she said. "Besides, shouldn't I stay here? It *is* the Student Council table." She gave a small unsure laugh.

"Oh, I'll be fine here," I assured her. "Besides, shouldn't a President oversee her own bake sale personally? Show everyone who's the boss?" I gave her a wink.

Lauren was a very humble girl. And stubborn. It can be hard to get her to do things sometimes. Sex helps sometimes, sure, but anyone is willing to jump through fire for the promise of getting fucked. But not even sex can persuade her to do everything I ask of her, even if it is in her best interests. Sometimes I have to rely on the little things.

In this case, Lauren has always had a silver spoon in her mouth because of her rich father. She never had to do anything for herself before. She told me one her biggest fears is ending up like one of those Hollywood nepotism babies who never have to do a day of work in their lives. She wants to earn her own keep. By no means does that mean she plans on donating every penny she gets when her father passes, though. She will use what money he has to help her do what she wants in the world and what she wants is to be remembered for helping people.

But at that moment? She would be helping both herself and everyone in the school by leaving me alone for a little bit.

She gave me a simple nod and stood up. "I'll get us some coffee while I'm up there."

"Thanks, babe."

She left without saying another word.

Benny approached after someone's mom and dad bought a few slices of pie and asked me how much I liked being a member of Student Council. It's a high school Student Council. What am I supposed to say when someone asks me how much I like it?

*"I rigged the election in favor of my girlfriend and got the job because she gave it to me."* Yeah, that sure would endear me to all those middle-aged fucks.

I simply could not get rid of them quick enough. They tipped well, though, so I guess that was nice of them. It did give Lauren ample time to get far, far away.

Benny was a pudgy kid. Metal band t-shirt, cut up jeans. If Ashley or Lauren took this kid back to their houses, their parents would think they were finally rebelling against them by dating the trashiest weasel they could find. Worst of all was the fade haircut. God, how I loathe fade haircuts. Either shave your head or grow your hair out. Long hair looks better on people anyway.

I handed him the backpack. "Here."

"Thank you." He made to walk away, but stopped after a single step. "Oh. Hey, boss."

I looked over and saw Damien approaching. My hands instinctively curled up into fists. Damien gave him a fist bump and sent Benny on his merry way with the backpack draped over his shoulder. He looks even sketchier in the dimly lit hallway than he does out in the sunlight.

My new best friend leaned over the table and gave me a toothy grin. "Hey, there, Prez."

"*Vice Prez* and what are you doing here exactly, *Boss*?" I asked.

"Just wanted to be sure we were, uh, copasetic, I guess."

"We cannot be seen together," I said, scolding him. "We discussed this."

"Aww. Afraid people might think we're dating?" he asked.

"You wish." I leaned forward. "Now please go back to your little table and make us some money. We're barely going to scrape by after how much it cost just to get this shit."

"Speaking of..." he said as he observed the food on the table and eyed up a particularly tasty slice of cherry pie. "We should discuss the split of the haul we're earning from this deal."

"I believe we agreed on a sixty-forty arrangement last night." It was a pain in the ass talking him down to that. We spent an hour going over costs and risks. What else could he possibly want?

"We did, but things changed since then. My weed guy lost his supplier so we're kinda scraping by on what he has left until he figures out what's up. He might have gone to prison, I don't know. Anyways, no supplier means that prices go up. And I'm not running a charity here."

I wanted to strangle the little pissant. I offered him the world and he was spitting in my face. The nerve of this little school shooter-looking motherfucker. Even though I wanted to ring his scrawny chicken neck, I was forced to give him some credit. Not only did he just take nearly all the money I had ever saved up in my entire life, he still had all of the brownies.

I swore I would ruin this little rat if he ever tried something like this ever again.

Instead of committing a murder right outside of the room I used to take Algebra I in, I took Lauren's advice and decided it was the best time to relax a little more. I stared into his little bug eyes and asked, "How much?"

"Seventy-thirty. And we keep any brownies we don't sell."

"Fine. Whatever. Keep 'em. What would I want with them?"

His grin grew like the Grinch's heart. "Might help you relax a little more."

"Oh, believe me, I'm as relaxed as humanly fucking possible." I shouldn't have snapped at him. He was openly laughing in my face. Niccolo Machiavelli would be ashamed of me. I had to regain the initiative fast. "Alright, look... what about a sixty-five/thirty-five split, the brownies, and maybe a piece of pie for your troubles?"

He snatched the pie up before I could even pick one out for him, the greedy little bastard. "Yeah, alright, I think we can agree to that. Pleasure doing business with you. I very much look forward to doing this with you again."

He took a bite and a little glob of cherry slid down his chin while he grinned at me. I envisioned it was a bit of his gums after I smashed him across the face with a rock and it made me feel a little better. He walked away and whistled as he went, crumbs flying out of his mouth and scattering across the floor.

That was when I realized what I was really up against. I had gotten played at my own game and I was expected to play it again. I would have to rethink my strategy for dealing with him the next time around. Tracy might prove useful again, after all. Whatever the relationship they had in the past was, I

might need to figure it out and fast. Figure out how to exploit it. Everyone has a weakness. Mine was thinking I was invincible. That would never happen again. Especially not with him.



## Lauren

I saw the whole thing from down the hall. How they didn't see me, I don't know. But I saw them and I know what I saw. My real issue was how would I confront her about it. With everything going on, I wondered if she was in the same situation as Ashley. My heart began to race just thinking about it. I couldn't go through that again.

Without thinking, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone. I began to call Spencer. He was the only one I knew who I could talk to about this. As I began looking for his number, I hesitated. If I got him involved, he would just worry for me. He was still in the hospital and he didn't need the added stress.

My other big fear was so selfish. I didn't want him to think I was dating another drug addict or whatever else Beth could be. He and I both went through that and I couldn't do it again. Plus it wasn't his business to worry. He was getting ready to be discharged later that day. This wasn't his problem. I would have to handle this myself.

Instead of asking for help, I buried the phone back in my pocket and slowly walked back to our table. As much as I wanted to plan out exactly what I wanted to say, I knew it would just come off as artificial and rehearsed. I'd never be able to stick to a script. I couldn't plan out class presentations for the life of me. I'd forget what I wanted to say before I even got in front of the class.

My hands and legs were shaking as I walked back to her. Beth saw me coming and smiled at me. The smile I fell in love with. The little gap between her perfectly white teeth. Her lips that I craved to have touch every inch of my body. I normally melted when I saw that smile.

But not this time.

"Everything going okay up front?" she asked while rearranging the food for the tenth time since she got here.

"I saw."

She glanced up at me mid-push of a plate of cookies. "Saw what?"

"You and him."

"Him who?"

"Beth, please don't play dumb," I begged. "That kid Damien."

"Oh, him," she said with a little chuckle and a roll of her eyes. "Yeah, he was just here buying some pie. He's said he's kinda bored over in front of the AV closet and needed to get away for a minute. I think he made a pass at me, but I told him to fuck off." She finally realized something was going on. "Lauren, what's wrong?"

"Why didn't he pay?" I asked. "And what was in the backpack?"

Her arms retreated back to her side. She looked up at me with confusion, but I knew it was all bullshit. She was lying to my face. "Lauren, what's going on?"

"Are you using?"

She scoffed and stared up at me like I was crazy. "What are you talking about? Like... drugs?"

I glanced over my shoulder to see if anyone was listening. It was still early so the hallway was all but empty. "Are you in trouble? If you're in trouble, we can get you the help you need. You're not alone in this."

Her eyes widened. "Jesus, Laur, do you think I'm a junkie?"

"No. I mean... I don't think so. Maybe drugs? Or alcohol. Or something else, I don't know... *fuck* just please talk to me, *please*."

She stood up and glided over to me. "Lauren, I'm not a drug addict."

"What was in the backpack?" I asked again, more sternly.

"Homework," she answered quickly. "I told Benny I'd give him some books I had on the Russian Revolution for a big paper he has to write for European History."

I couldn't believe it. She was lying to my face again. Did she think I was an idiot?

"It's not drugs or drug money or... whatever else you think," she said. "Just homework. Why do you think I'm lying to you?"

"Because he's friends with Damien and Damien just happened to show up after he left."

"It's not like the AV Club has a lot of visitors right now."

"Beth, *come on*. Damien is a..." I couldn't think of a good word for what he really was. "He's a rat. A loser. He sells stolen midterms and Adderall to the AP kids. What happens if O'Reilly sees you with him? He'd think you're a loser, too."

"He already thinks I'm a loser!" she countered. "And you. And Ashley and Katherine and everyone else here."

"I know that, but Damien is—"

"Okay, look, I didn't want to talk about this yet, but now is... I guess as good a time as any..." She weighed her words in her mind. I was dreading what she was going to say. "You and I both know we're gonna need serious money for student council business. The musical is getting fucked over, the newspaper doesn't make money... It's not going to look good. For either of us. Why not team up with the guy who is swimming in money and knows how to make more?"

I realized where that was going almost immediately. "Was *he* the one you wanted as our Treasurer?"

As much as the extracurriculars around here needed a boost in funding, I wasn't going to use money made off of plagiarized research papers and who knows whatever else he sells by that tree to fund a high school musical. I could end up getting expelled for even remotely having a hand in that kind of thing.

"I know it sounds like a lot—"

"Why didn't you just tell me that so we could talk it out?" I asked.

"Because I knew you would shoot it down as soon as I said it," she said, a little louder and much more defensively than she probably realized.

"Of course I would!" I exclaimed. "We can't let someone like that on Student Council! O'Reilly would—"

"God, just forget O'Reilly for a second, please!" she said, cutting me off again with a scowl. "Don't you think I didn't know the risks of giving him a job? I know exactly what I'm doing and even if something did go horribly wrong, I'd take the heat for it. You're gonna be okay, I promise. He can help us. We need him."

"No. We don't." I needed to put my foot down. She could be very stubborn, but there was a limit to how much I would let her get away with. I love her, but enough was enough. "I'm sorry, but we aren't doing this. We have good people with us already and I'm not ruining it by letting someone like him touch our money. Ashley is *good*," I assured her, "and Kate is great, too. Kate's going places. And so are we." I dropped my volume a little. "I love you, Beth. We're supposed to be together forever. Please just be honest with me and tell me if you're in trouble or something. This just isn't the way."

"I swear I'm not in any trouble" Beth said, finally breathing after what seemed like an eternity, "and I love you, too and I am trying to be honest with you. I promise. I just want you to trust me on this

one. I know things have been really shitty lately and I've been a real bitch and I'm sorry. I'm not on anything and I'm not in trouble. I'm just..." She sighed and held her head in her hands. "I'm an awful person. I have a lot on my mind right now and I'm *trying* to deal with it on my own and I know it's not fair to you and..." She exhaled sharply. "I'm sorry. Just trust me here. Okay?"

Even though she was lying through my teeth, I knew there was good in her and she was struggling. I hated that I couldn't resist her. I couldn't leave her out to dry. Not after what happened before with Ashley. Leaving Ashley alone when she needed me most was the most heartless thing I'd ever done in my life and she had no right to ever want to speak to me again for it. We both made mistakes before and after we broke up. I know I could have done more. If I did that again to someone I loved, I might as well just die.

"Okay," I said. "I forgive you."

Beth leaned in and gave me a hug. I returned it and stared down the hallway, half-expecting to see Damien watching and laughing at the sight of us having a stupid fight. But the hallway was empty and we were alone with our thoughts. I wish I could get inside her head and see how she thinks.

"Thank you," she whispered into my chest. My heart beat a little faster. Not because of how close we were or the fact we were hugging in public, but because I knew what had to be done. I had to tear the bandage off.

"But I need you to know," I said, pulling away and looking down at her, "Damien won't be the Treasurer. I'm giving the job to Hannah Waters. I met with her and Victoria and Jasmine during lunch. She's a really cool girl and I think she'll do the job well. I know you were trying to help with Damien and I understand why you wanted him, but I have final say on this."

Part of me wanted to add an "I hope you understand." or an "I'm sorry" to cushion the blow of being rejected, but I knew that would make me sound weak. Beth wanted me to be President so I could improve my leadership skills. This was how I was going to show her how much I was adapting to the new position. If she loved me, she would understand. If she were in my position, she'd call it a "breaking eggs to make an omelet" situation. I could tell she was disappointed in me, but I didn't care. I was still angry about everything, even if I still loved her.

She studied me with an emotionless stare. "Okay. I can't wait to meet her." She took her seat and began rearranging the food once again. That was all she said to me for the rest of the day. We wouldn't talk again until the funeral on Tuesday.

Kate returned a few minutes later and sat down in the open seat between us that I felt was best to be left unoccupied. "So what'd I miss?"

## Beth

First I lose all of my money to a bargain bin Elliot Rodger, then my own girlfriend calls me a liar, and now we have some stranger managing our money. I played all of my cards and I lost everything. Humiliated twice in one day. What a fucking joke.

The bake sale ended at three. It looked like we made a fair amount of money, but that was the least of my concerns. After nearly eight straight hours of serving pie to a bunch of old fucks who spent the remainder of their days pining for the days of Reagan and casual homophobia in the media, I was exhausted. Making sure Lauren got the message that I was justifiably mad at her for accusing me of being a drug addict and going behind my back, I broke off from the rest of student council before she could give me a ride home.

Damien's little posse acne-riddled gangbangers must have gone home as well. We met down by the baseball field. I found him in the dugout counting the cash. It was not pleasant seeing him waving the money around in the open like that.

"You wanna put that away?" I asked. "Someone might see."

Damien smiled and tied off a bundle of cash with a rubber band. "Baseball doesn't start practicing until the winter. The football team is working out in the weight room. Who else would be down here in the middle of September? A couple trying to hook up without being caught?"

At first I thought he was talking about me and Lauren. If he found out about what happened with Tracy, he'd hold that over me until one of us died. Instead of blackmailing me, he gave me this look to see if I would consider it. I wanted to vomit.

"As much as I would love to, I'll pass. But thank you."

He happily shrugged and tossed me the rolled up wad of cash. It was noticeably smaller than the one beside him. Without hesitation, I unwrapped it and began to count. I was already getting fucked over. If he skimmed a few extra dollars off the top from the bare minimum I needed to make to get by.

"We made a killing," he gloated as I did the math in my head. "Almost \$800 on short notice? Not bad. Not bad at all."

"*You* made a killing," I said with a frown. "What'd you get? Over \$500? Plus the brownies and the money you took from me."

"The money *you* owed *me* for going along with this?" he asked. "Oh, speaking of..." He reached down and took out a gym bag. He tossed it over to me. I heard plastic rubbing together inside and pulled the zipper down to peer inside. It was exactly what I asked for. "I got you two as a thank you for being so cooperative. Plus I had some of my friends print you out their contact list. They thought it was weird that you were so desperate for phone numbers."

My eyes shot back up at him. I was ready to choke the life out of him. "You told them my name?"

"What? No. I just told them somebody was buying phone numbers."

"Good. And you'll see soon enough," I promised. "This will do. Thank you for the transaction. I hope we will be able to work together again sometime," I said with incredible stiffness and sarcasm. I prayed he got the message that I hated him.

"So when do I get the credit card?"

I guess he did not receive the message. He wore that smarmy grin that made my skin crawl. Even though he said he did not intend to fuck with the school, he clearly had no aversion to spending their money.

“After speaking with Lauren, we have come to the conclusion that Hannah Waters would be better suited for the position of Treasurer. I am sorry for the confusion and hope we can find some way to work with you outside of that position.”

He frowned. “But you said the plan was you were giving me the job.”

“Plans change.”

He rolled his eyes and began to walk away. “Fine. Whatever. I didn’t feel like having O’Reilly breathing down my neck for the rest of the year anyway. Call me if you ever actually want to relax and need something to smoke. It looks like a vein is gonna burst in your forehead.”

## Lauren

"I don't know what was wrong with her today. Was it me? Did I do something to piss her off so badly? I leave to help Ashley and Kate pack things up at the front of the school and when I come back, she's just gone. No text, no call, not even a note. It was so fucking infuriating. I just want to... ugh!"

Spencer sat on his couch with a pint of ice cream cradled under his arm. I could tell my trauma dumping was ruining his snack just by the look on his face. "Well... that really is a lot."

I sat back in the chair and stared at the ceiling. "Sorry. I know you've only been home for a day and now I'm asking you to help me deal with this."

"Beats sitting around watching *Desperate Housewives*."

"Because you get to see it happen in real life with me and her?"

"You said it, not me."

I smiled. He was really sweet about the whole thing, even if it was my dumb problem. I didn't want to go to him for advice, but I had a breakdown in my car after I got home and needed to talk to someone. Beth left before I could offer her a ride. I knew she didn't want to talk to me right now. We'd kiss and make up eventually. This was our third fight. It always got better. The honeymoon stage can't last forever.

"Do you think I'm the one who needs to grow up?" I asked.

"Because she's hanging out with Damien Wells without telling you?" he asked with genuine concern in his voice. "Fuck no, that kid's a freak. I heard he sells meth to middle schoolers. Why would Beth want to hang out with him?"

"I really don't know," I admitted. "She says she doesn't do drugs or anything and she's not desperate enough to go to him for a test or homework—"

"But what was in the bag?" I told him about the missing backpack as soon as he asked me what was wrong. Was it right? I don't know. "I mean, if it was there when she sat down and not there when you both got back up then that has to mean he has it, right?"

"I guess. I hope not. Fuck..."

Spencer sat up and shuffled closer to me, his cast brushing against the floor. He should have been elevating it. "Do you want me to be brutally honest?"

I hated hearing anything close to that phrase. It never meant anything good was coming. I mean, it obviously never does, but there was just something so damning about knowing the blunt truth was coming and you needed to hear it. I nodded my head and braced myself for whatever he could possibly say.

"It sounds like she has some stuff going on right now and she's trying to push you away."

"Well, fuck, I could have told you that." I didn't mean to sound so rude. He cut me off before I could mutter an apology.

"Wait, wait, hear me out," he said, trying to salvage what point he was trying to make. "So she goes from not being able to stay away from you to not talking to you or saying where she is and just randomly starts hanging out with a creep out of nowhere. Do you think it's because she's..." He made this little motion with his hands, beckoning me to finish his train of thought for him.

"What? Like cheating on me?" I scoffed. "Please. She might have some issues, but she knows I would dump her in a heartbeat if she tried to do that. I love her, but I wouldn't even consider giving her another chance if she did that."

Memories of my parents splitting up washed back over me. Seven years of pain bubbled back up to the surface. Neither of them were bad people. They just did dumb things. Beth understood this and swore she would never do that. I hope she remembers that promise.

“Never say never,” Spencer warned.

I still wasn’t convinced. “She won’t cheat on me. Trust me. She isn’t into guys. At all.”

“So what do you think it is?” he asked. I shook my head. I had absolutely no idea what she could possibly be doing with him. “Maybe you should just give her some space and let her deal with whatever’s going on on her own,” he suggested.

Beth and I had barely spent more than a day apart since we started dating. The idea of space was not real to us. The only “space” we had was when Beth got sick with a stomach bug in July, but we still texted when she was awake. Besides that, we were joined at the hip. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe I was being too clingy. I couldn’t lose her like I lost Ashley.

“Let’s change the subject,” I said. Thinking about her hurt too much.

“Yeah, sure, whatever works best for you.”

I reached down and took out my backpack. “I brought you your homework.”

“Oh, glory!” he exclaimed in a dopey overdone southern accent that would have gotten him banned from the local rodeo.

I smiled and handed him the bag. “You need to get a new lock. Yours sticks.”

“Eh, I’ll worry about it when I get back in a week.” He looked over the list I had written up for him. Ashley and I spent ten minutes after the bake sale making a list of his homework and gathering up his books and stuff from his locker. Because he was in a hospital so far away from his house, O’Reilly and the teachers agreed that we wouldn’t need to bring him his stuff until he came home. He’d have a two week long extension to turn everything in starting after he got back to school. “So what’s on the menu for today, boss? What’d I miss while I was out?”

“What *didn’t* you miss?” I asked with a smile. “First, the Chem lab you missed. Not too bad. I’m supposed to walk you through what we did and have you draw your own conclusions.”

“So you did the lab at school... and I’m supposed to guess what happened...”

“Yeah, she really didn’t think this one through, did she?”

“Our tax dollars hard at work.” He read the worksheet over before setting it down with a sigh. “I’m sorry you’re wasting your afternoon here doing homework you’ve already done with me,” he said with absolute sincerity.

“What? Don’t be sorry, I don’t mind. I don’t have any other plans.”

“I mean, you could be shopping for Homecoming,” he suggested. “Or exercising. Going out to dinner. Get a tan. Doing literally anything else besides being stuck in here telling me what you did in a chem lab.”

“I seriously don’t mind,” I said. “Plus I don’t tan. Stupid British genetics.”

“Gotta love those Anglo-Saxons.”

“Normans,” I corrected.

“Huh?”

“Not Anglo-Saxon genetics. *Norman*,” I explained. “Like from Normandy. You know, the place we landed at on D-Day. Apparently I’m a distant descendant of some old Norman lord who invaded England with William the Conqueror.” I said this with pride. Even if we had absolutely no real connection to England besides my mother being born there and going on a few vacations there growing up, it was still a cool personal fact.

Spencer's eyes went wide. "Wait holy shit really?!"

I happily smiled back. "You can call me *Your Grace* whenever you wish. But only because we're friends."

"That's pretty fucking cool," he admitted. "Oh, sorry, language. That is pretty fucking cool, *Your Grace*." He did a little mock curtsy while sitting down. It was all very embarrassing. I giggled a little.

"You know," I said, "sometimes when I was growing up, I wished I could've been born some beautiful English Duchess or Princess or whatever. Something where I wouldn't have to worry about my future or anything."

"I think every girl has that dream," he said.

"Yeah, true," I said. "I guess my family background made me think I was... special or something. I don't know. The really pasty skin my however-many-greats-grandparents gave me really brings out my hair."

I gave my blonde locks a little twirl and smelt my shampoo as it began to waft around the room. It was this banana-scented one Beth got me for a two-month anniversary present. It was a silly excuse to give me a present and I really didn't want us to become one of *those* couples, but it smelled super sweet and it made my hair feel so silky smooth. I still needed to get her something for our five month.

"You do look like you're glowing most of the time."

I felt myself blush a little. We began to go over the lab together. Every so often, I'd catch him staring at me before he looked away and pretended to be looking at something else. I hate saying it felt nice to be noticed by someone. With everything going on with Beth, someone being genuine with me and giving me the time of day was great. It was just a dumb, little crush. It meant nothing. Almost any girl would be attracted to the hot guy treating them well and saying all the right things. It means nothing.

We had to pause our fun little discussion on Mendelian Genetics when I got the phone call. I was going to ignore it, but seeing that it was Ashley made me feel compelled to answer.

"Hello? Wait, Ash, slow down, what's going on? No... no, no, no, are you fucking serious?! Stay there, I'll be right over. Okay, just give me ten minutes, I'll be right there."



## **MEMORIES III**

## Lauren

I spent the whole week planning for it. And the week before that. Yeah, this may have been a months-long planning process. You only turn sixteen once, after all.

We spent our seven month anniversary together to make up for not being able to celebrate our six month. Ash was on vacation with her Dad up north in Michigan so we missed it. I made sure to specify that that date counted for both her birthday *and* our big half-year anniversary. If I could keep this a surprise, it'd be so much more fun. Ashley and I had been dating since October and I wanted to be the best girlfriend in the whole fucking world on her very special day.

It wouldn't be one of those "My Super Sweet Sixteen" birthdays that people still laugh about online years after they first aired. Thank God because she knows I'd dump her ass in a heartbeat if she cried about getting her a horse that was the wrong color. How else could you tell someone how much you love them than spending their entire birthday with them?

It was all mapped out to the most minute microscopic detail. Every stupid possible inconvenience was prepared for. I even had a "Code Black" planned in the event one of us either ended up in the hospital or died. As romantic as it would have been to just drift away in each other's arms, that was not happening under my watch. We needed to stay alive long enough to have the cake.

The timing couldn't be more perfect either. Her Mom was away on business, it was the weekend, and all the major sports were over so we didn't need to worry about making it to cheer practice or a game or anything. Sure we had Finals coming up fast, but there were more important things to do than worry about our grades.

The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist and the greatest mistake Ashley Williams ever made was telling me the location of the spare key to her house. She told me in the event I ever needed to drop off homework or sneak into the house to hook up on the rare occasion that her Mom was actually home long enough to catch us together. It was probably our little fifteen year old minds trying to play house and slowly work up to actually living together one day. Call me stupid, but I was already picturing our wedding after just a couple months.

I had free reign to come and go as I pleased and a locked door wasn't going to stop me. Unless I acted like a total stalker and broke a window trying to get in and she just happened to have a gun locked and loaded, I wasn't exactly at risk of being shot.

So of course, because I'm an asshole, I had the biggest, fattest grin on my face as I broke into the house of a sleeping teenage girl while she slept. I had a backpack full of goodies slung over my shoulder to make the occasion special. My weapon of choice, however, was the noisemaker I got from the dollar store a couple days prior. God, I knew she was gonna hate that. It only made me smile more.

Before I entered the house, I called her to make sure she wasn't totally asleep when I went inside the house. I didn't want to have to call a "Code Black" after the first two minutes if she actually *did* have a gun on standby. She groggily answered and I hung up as soon as she did. I figured she had passed right back out before she could redial the number.

I may be a total creep, but at least I had good intentions.

Once inside, I crept up the stairs and made my way toward her room at the end of the long dark hallway. The door was slightly ajar and I peered inside. I was right; she had already fallen back asleep between my calling and my entering the house. Top tier Always Sunny shit right there.

I stepped into the room and turned the fan and lights on. Channeling the little US Cavalry bugle player I was in a past life, I blew that noisemaker until I was turning purple. Ashley heard me and covered

herself with her pillows. I was not having that at all. After turning on the ceiling fan, I sauntered into the room while tooting the noisemaker and creating the world's worst marching tune as I went. Ashley was groaning into the fluffy feather pillow the whole time. I stood right over her and played my song, irritating her further. If she wasn't wrapped up under a cocoon of blankets, I know she would have taken a shot at me.

"Morning, sleepyhead!" I exclaimed, the noisemaker nearly falling to the floor. She decided to be extremely ungrateful and cover herself with a second pillow. I ripped it from her hands and tossed it over my shoulder. "Ashy-Poo! This is your scheduled 7:00 A.M. wake-up call!" Still no response. "Come on, idiot, get up."

She turned over and tried to hide under the blankets, thinking she could blend into the rest of the bed like the world's worst sniper. I grabbed the blankets near her feet and gave them a mighty tug, ripping them from her grasp. She shivered and finally started to stir like a bear awakening from hibernation.

"Stop! It's freezing!"

"Ash, it's like seventy degrees in here, don't be a baby." I hurried over and happily removed the final pillow from her hands. She was left with nowhere left to hide. I leaned in real close and gave the noisemaker a little jolt right in her face. She finally decided to open her eyes, but quickly closed them because of the ceiling fan's light being on. The little wispy strands at the end of the tube tickled her nose. She was *pissed*.

"God, you are such an asshole," she groaned as her eyes finally adjusted to the light.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't quite catch that," I said. "Maybe speak a little louder?" She was about to repeat herself when I gave another loud blast with the noisemaker. She almost hit her head off the headboard. I couldn't help but laugh in her face.

"Why are you being such an asshole today?!"

"I had to wake you up somehow, dummy," I said. I blew the noisemaker again. It gave her a little boop on the nose. She wasn't impressed.

"We are so breaking up," she said while rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

"Oh, really? That's a shame. Who's gonna buy you dinner tonight?" I asked. "Or lunch? Or breakfast?"

There were three ways to Ashley Williams' heart: sex, shopping, and food. I was willing to offer all three today without a second thought. I really am the best girlfriend ever. How could she possibly entertain the thought of breaking up with me?

Ashley perked up immediately. "Free food, you say?"

"All you can eat." I winked.

She must have taken this as some sort of lead-in to something because she sat straight up and started to kiss me. It felt so nice to hold her. When she pulled away, she laughed. "Okay, I'm totally fine with you getting here early, but you know you could have gotten here a little later and we still could have spent the entire rest of the day together, right? And... you know... maybe let me sleep in a bit on my very special day?"

"Unacceptable. We will not waste a minute apart if I have anything to say about it. Oh, by the way..." I handed her the key I had placed in my pocket for safe keeping.

"Aww, babe, is this the key to your heart?" She batted her eyelashes.

"No, it's the key to your front door. You didn't leave it unlocked last night."

"Well, shit, I didn't want somebody breaking in or anything."

"Yeah, wouldn't that be the worst?"

She snatched the key from me and she basically threw me back onto the bed with her. When I finally looked back up at the clock, it was well past eight. Ashley just had a way of making minutes seem like seconds and hours fly by like jet planes. I gently nuzzled myself underneath her chin and let our bodies fold back into one.

“We should probably get up,” Ash said as she stroked my hair. “You still owe me breakfast”

“You’re right,” I said, stretching my legs. “Wanna go take a shower?”

She grinned and dragged me into the bathroom connected to her room. When we emerged from the coral pink tiles and little novelty soaps, it was almost nine. It would have been later, but we managed to use up all of the hot water. Even though we could have spent the entire day in each other’s arms, my stomach started growling. She laughed pretty hard at me for it so I jabbed at her ribcage and quickly escaped before she could hit me back. All in all, it was the best shower I have ever had in my life. I felt bad for using so much water. We’re in the middle of a bad drought. So worth it, though.

We stopped at a little diner a few blocks away from her house. They served pancakes and waffles as big as your head. It was a little pricey because of the gargantuan portions, which caused Ash to ask me over and over if I was okay with paying.

“Of course I am,” I repeated for the fifth time. “It’s your birthday. Let me treat you.”

“I’m just saying, I have my card—”

“Ash, I swear to God, if you even think of reaching for the check when it comes, I will literally murder you.”

We played footsie under the table as we ate our weight in pancakes and bacon and syrup and coffee. They sat us in a little booth far away from the rest of the customers. You would have to really strain your neck to see us fooling around. It felt nice to be out together in public, even if we weren’t officially “out” yet. Even if the rest of the world saw two friends smiling and laughing at each other’s jokes, we knew what we were. Everyone else saw “a couple of besties” and that was perfectly fine with me. We were happy. That was all that mattered.

I only managed to eat a quarter of my pancake before I tapped out. Ashley, to her credit, ate around a third of the waffle and then proceeded to collapse off to the side of the table.

“No more waffles, Mom. Please.”

The waitress smiled at her and handed me the check. I made sure Ashley never got a look at the forty dollar bill we managed to rack up. I knew it wouldn’t be the largest one we would accumulate over the course of the day so I wanted to spare her the self-inflicted embarrassment of having her significant other spend hundreds of dollars on her in a single day. I know she fully intended to do the same for me on my birthday in October so I didn’t want to set a standard for her to live up to. She didn’t like talking about her family’s money problems, but I still knew she couldn’t afford to break the bank for me.

She only had to spend a dollar on me. I wouldn’t care. I just wanted to make her happy.

“So,” Ashley said as she sat up, struggling to move with the ten pounds of waffle in her stomach, “what’s the next big thing you had planned?”

I happily smiled at her. “I’m glad you asked!” I pulled out the actual list I had made with every address and opening and closing time written down. It was like Spongebob’s big list of stuff to do with Squidward. Everything on my list was written in red, too. I was very thorough.

“Holy shit,” Ashley said.

“I know.” I winked and continued to read my little notebook. “It says here... *ohh*, you get a choice!”

“As if I didn’t already have a choice to begin with?” she asked. “Is this supposed to be a kidnapping or something with a couple extra steps?”

“Hush. Now it says here that we can either go to that movie theater that has Retro Day on Saturdays, and we both know how much you love old movies, *or* we can see what’s in the Lauren Bradshaw Mystery Box. *Ooooooooooh!*” I said in a sing-songy voice.

She shook her head and massaged her stomach. “Well, I *do* like old movies... but I feel like if I sit in a dark theater for two hours, I’m going to end up passing out because that waffle really got me.” She glanced around the room to see if anyone could hear her. Satisfied, she lowered her voice a bit. “So I guess I’m going with the mystery box.”

“Oh, fuck *yes!*” I exclaimed, a bit too loud. “Ash, would you make me the happiest woman alive and go mini golfing with me?”

“Mini... golfing...”

“You sound a lot less enthused than I was expecting,” I said. “It’s mini golfing! Everyone loves mini golfing! Except maybe, like, quadriplegics, but last time I checked,” I flailed my arms around to prove my point, “we both have our arms so we are going mini golfing. End of discussion.”

“What happened to me having a choice?” she asked as she placed her leftovers in the boxes the waitress brought us. We ended up filling three styrofoam boxes each. Those pancakes and waffles were huge, man.

“You just made a choice,” I said. “Either pass out in a movie theater or golf with me.”

“Oh, well when you put it that way...” She threw a little piece of bacon at me and it struck me in the nose. Refusing to show defeat, I snatched up the little pile of fat and ate it. She laughed a little. She had the most beautiful smile.

Mini golf may be fun, but I am abominably terrible at it. I might as well have been at the driving range because of how hard I hit my poor little green ball around. It’s not like I wanted to send it two holes over. I guess I’m just a natural who thinks a couple steps ahead or something. Ash fared much better. I don’t think she ever needed more than three shots to win a hole. We stopped taking score after I accidentally sent a ball into the street. We weren’t exactly sure how many strokes that was worth so it kind of ended the competitive nature of the game.

I would like to say I let her win because it was her birthday. It wouldn’t be true, but I can still say it.

“Alright!” I said as we entered the car she was given by her Mom when she came home a couple days ago. She had to leave again yesterday morning, but the car remained on the condition that she wait until she was legally allowed to drive it before taking it for joy rides (or at least don’t get arrested in it.) She only had her learner’s permit and I was not eighteen yet so she was driving very carefully this whole time. “Next up is a scheduled event! You might have choices here, but I’m sure you will be *very* excited for this one!”

“I’m sure people driving the cars that almost crashed because a teenage girl went running in the middle of traffic to find her green golf ball were very excited, too,” Ashley said dryly.

“Shut up. The windmill got in my way. So here is the address...” I typed the address into the car’s built-in GPS. Technology is so wonderful these days. “*Aaaaaand* boom! Let’s go, we don’t want to be late for this one! And no peeking. This is a surprise.”

She glared at me. “It’s a surprise that I am driving myself to...”

“Are you gonna drive or am I gonna have to get out and push?”

“Oh, Jesus Christ...” Ashley started the car and safely pulled out of the mini golf course.

I had been especially excited for this one. One of the first things we discussed when we first started dating was doing this, but school made it all but impossible. Plus we would need to find someone to give us a ride and our parents were always super busy and someone might suspect something if we tried to break off and do our own thing alone. This is why being in the closet as a fifteen year old in Texas fucking sucks.

This event was not going to suck, though. As soon as we pulled into the parking lot and saw the sign hanging from the side of a fence in the parking lot, Ashley's eyes lit up. "No fucking way! Is that what we're here for?!"

"We've been talking about doing this for... how long exactly?" I asked. "I don't think we even started dating yet. Am I not the greatest girlfriend ever?"

"Dude, I fucking love you!"

She leaned over and kissed me. I wasn't even worried that someone would see us. I kissed her back and just enjoyed the moment. Anyone who would judge us can drop dead. I'm here with my girlfriend to see some motherfucking penguins.

Once a month, every month between September and the last week of June, the Dallas Zoo held "Penguin Day" in their aviary. A select number of people get to meet the penguins, feed them, and spend an hour with them. Ashley *loves* penguins and would have sold her soul to a demon for the chance to hang out with one. It cost a little bit more than I expected, but we were part of a lucky group of ten who got to hang out with the little cuties. It also helps that my dad went to college with one of the members of the Zoo's Board of Directors. Nepotism is pretty cool sometimes.

Let's just say I got bumped up the waiting list for tickets by quite a few months.

We were brought into a little auditorium alongside eight other lucky ducks. The animal handlers brought the penguin in through a side door that connected to what I assume is the vet's office. They waddled in and I thought Ash was going to start weeping. She was so delighted to see those little guys, she almost shrieked. The whole thing was exactly like what was promised in the brochure. We got to hand-feed them (Ashley did the feeding, I took pictures and recorded it) and the people from the zoo talked about them and where they were brought in from. The penguin we got to hang out with was named Mario. The handler told me this was in reference to a hockey player, but I don't watch hockey so I just pretended it was the little Italian plumber reincarnated as an African Penguin that was born in captivity. He was the sweetest little thing.

When the hour was up, Ashley looked quite sad that her new friend go. She swore she'd be back soon to say hello. We made plans for after Finals to come back and see them again.

After the Penguin Day exhibition, we checked out the rest of the zoo. Personally, I am a fan of the majestic giraffe and enjoyed seeing them up close and personal. But above all else, nothing made me happier than seeing Fred the Capybara eating some corn husks and giving absolutely zero shits about anything. Capybaras are perfect, innocent creatures and they deserve the world. The corgis of the rodent community, which is an ironic thing to say since capybaras are monsters compared to their guinea pig cousins.

After we finished exploring the zoo, we ate lunch in the food court and Ashley gawked about how much she loved it. I never felt more proud of myself. I sure know how to make a girl feel special.

"How did you manage to get tickets for this?" she asked, all but gawking. "They're, like, booked up for months!"

"You said you wanted to do this and I listened." I reached over and held her hand. "Happy birthday, Ash. I love you."

I felt so bad because she was physically fighting back tears. “Fuck, I think you’re gonna make me cry.”

“Well don’t do that!” I joked. “Today’s your birthday. You can’t cry on your birthday.”

“Is that a rule?” she asked with a laugh as she pressed a napkin to her cheek.

“It is now.”

She gently wiped her eyes and then began to reapply her mascara. “You know, I never expected that you would actually plan out a whole day for me. I thought you’d just come over and we’d eat takeout or something. But all this...”

“Are you kidding? I’ve been planning today for weeks!” I finished my burger and leaned forward on my elbows. “You deserve this. I know you’ve been really upset lately. We’re not just hanging out on your couch.”

She nodded a little, her tears finally gone. “Thank you. And yeah, I’ve been... a mess.”

“Is it Grace?” I asked.

We never talked about what went down with her and Kara. I know Ashley was beside her the entire time so I don’t know how much involvement she had with all the bullying. I was scared to find out. I think I was just too happy staring at the reflection of Ashley Williams in the mirror, I was afraid to look at the source of the reflection. The mirror hid all the bad stuff so I could just revel in the shiny artificial projection.

Grace committed suicide two days before Ashley’s birthday. Nobody found out until Friday when someone who lived by her house saw the ambulance pull up. There were cops everywhere. The neighbor saw her body being taken away on the stretcher. Cell phones are a blessing and a curse and soon everyone knew that something went down.

I found out around noon and spent the rest of the day staring at the ceiling.

“Yeah...” she began to cry again and went back to cleaning her eyes. “It was so fucked up, especially towards the end. And now... she’s gone.”

“Can I ask you something?” She nodded. “Is she the reason you don’t want to come out yet? Because of everything that’s happened?”

She weighed it over in her head before finally nodding a little. “It’s nothing against you, I swear—”

“No, believe me, I get it,” I said, trying to assure her.

“And after today... I think I kind of want to. Like maybe just to our friends, but it’s still... *something*, you know? I’m just... I don’t know. Fuck...”

“Well no matter what happens,” I began, reaching out to hold her hands. “I’ll always be here for you.” She gave my hands a squeeze.

I was willing to move a mountain for her. It’s stupid and cliché to say this, mostly because I was fifteen and every fifteen year old thinks they know how relationships work and theirs is going to last forever and they’re gonna get married and everything will be perfect, but I really did think ours was meant to last. She was the only person I have ever seen myself being with until I died. She saw me as an equal. She *loved* me. There is no one else in the world like her and I’ll never be able to replace her. If we didn’t need our parents to approve on account of us being minors, I absolutely would have made a dumb decision and proposed on the spot. It was the most perfect chance I’d ever get.

I gave her a chance to collect herself before I took out my notebook and scanned over what was still to come. “Alright, so, we still have time to hang around here for another hour or so before we go to the next thing.”

“How much do you have planned?” she asked, genuinely shocked.

“Uhh... shit, let me look. Okay, it’s this next thing, which I know you will really enjoy, a surprise that I totally didn’t just spoil, dinner, and then we go back to your place for presents and cake.” I put the notebook away. “You might wanna finish eating so we can get one last look around.”

“You want to see Fred the Capybara again, don’t you?”

“YES!”

After one last pass at some of our favorite spots and us concocting a scheme to break into the zoo and free my beloved capybara, we boarded the car and drove off to the next destination. I had this one in my back pocket in the event she didn’t want to go to the movies. She pulled into the parking lot and found a spot near the front doors.

“A museum?” she asked.

“There’s a new exhibit I think you’re going to enjoy.”

Thankfully they didn’t have a massive banner to spoil it for her, though I wish they had advertised it better. I barely heard about it until a random ad popped up on my timeline and I instantly knew this was a sign that I needed to mix it into our plans. If we’d missed it on her birthday, I’d just take her back on another day. I’m glad we made it when we did.

Since we were under eighteen, we got in for a discount. We walked around a little, taking in the sights of generic American history. Lots of stuff about Texas and their sports teams. Some stuff about the Alamo and a JFK memorial discussing the Civil Rights Act. All very fun stuff if you’re into historical history. That wasn’t the kind of history we were here for, though. That was on the second floor.

We climbed the stairs and Ash stopped in the doorway, her eyes as wide as dinner plates. “Holy shit, how did I not hear about this?!” she exclaimed.

I smirked. “You like?”

“Uh, yes! Come on, let’s check it out!”

The entire second floor of the museum was turned into one big interactive exhibit discussing old movies, something Ashley was insanely passionate about. Tons of memorabilia from movies dating back to the 1900’s were on display. Costumes, props, backstage pictures, you name it, it was there. I hadn’t seen a tenth of those kinds of movies so I just assumed they were good.

This was everything Ashley lived for. She could turn a conversation into nothing but a nostalgia trip for movies that came out from before her parents were even born. No one else in school actually cared about these kinds of things, least of all the other cheerleaders and jocks, except for the people in the A.V. Club. I tried to convince her to join way back in December, at the height of our honeymoon phase. I thought it would be good for her. It was a very short conversation.

“Come on, you know you would make so many friends there,” I said. “Everyone talking about old movies together, *watching* old movies together. How can you possibly say no?”

She shook her head and made a face that made me feel like I was a child being talked down to by her mother who thought she knew so much better than me. I didn’t understand why she thought this was stupid, even after explaining it to me.

“Look, as cool as it would be to have friends with interests that I could actually talk about, I can’t risk joining the A.V. Club. Especially not right now.”

“But... why?”

She gave my hand a squeeze and gave a little smile, her secret aching to be revealed. “I was talking to Kara and she said that...” She squealed a little and tapped her feet with excitement. “You were



right! It's gonna happen! She said that she's going to talk to some of the girls and make a push for me to be Head Cheerleader after she graduates at the end of the year! Isn't this great?!"

Now I was obviously not a stranger to the politics of high school. I was somewhat of a "popular girl" in my grade even though I really didn't give a shit about that sort of thing. If you're a cheerleader, especially one in line to become Head Cheerleader, that's a big fucking deal. The A.V. Club, despite making the hype packages before the big sporting games that get shown on the Jumbotrons (which probably cost the taxpayers of Arlington millions of dollars to build) and working with the Yearbook Committee to make the "End of the Year Slideshow" that played at graduation, were not exactly the most popular kids around.

"That's so great, sweetie!" I said, trying to sound encouraging. I thought having friends that weren't Kara Alderman would be good for her. "But I really think you should give it a shot. You might have a lot of fun."

Honestly, I was more worried about her health and safety than anything else.

Over the past couple months up to that point, I'd noticed she was changing. She was more outgoing, sure, but she was... different. Full of herself. Snarky. Narcissistic. She'd been doing a lot of partying with Kara and Kylie and all the Junior and Senior girls since football ended. I was getting kinda worried because most of her weekends ended up either being recovery time for the partying she did on Fridays or partying until early on Sunday morning and then showing up to school hungover. I'm glad she had friends, but she could do a lot better than Kara and her sycophants.

"Maybe if things don't work out, I'll think about it," she said, visibly unhappy that I was pressing this issue so much. "Now can we make out already?"

That was back in January. It was now May and since then, she was starting to embrace being so cool with old movies. To some extent, she even befriended the head of the A.V. Club, Kenny Lang. I think they met at a party. They openly discussed movies when she wasn't spending lunch with the girls. If they were coming, he knew to leave, but it was nice to see that she was trying to branch out and meet new people that weren't trying to get her drunk every Friday night.

Kenny would be gone at the end of the school year, but there were other people who she could befriend. Hell, I'd join if it made her more comfortable.

She all but ran from station to station so she could share her knowledge of each movie with me. I had learned a little about these kinds of movies from dating her, but she will always be a walking search bar and as long as I'm dating her and we do movie night dates, I'll be the one going on hour-long Wikipedia binges.

She made sure to not pull any of the stops when she was giving me the grand tour.

"Oh, God, I *loved* watching *Godfather* with my dad. Probably not the best movie to show someone who's twelve, but the acting is amazing."

"You want to see a good Western movie? *True. Grit*. John Wayne might be a racist, sexist, uber asshole, but damn if he didn't give it his all. He *earned* that Oscar. The remake was pretty good, but I'll take Kim Darby over Hailee Steinfeld any day. Sequel sucked, though. Still have to finish reading the book"

"Everyone ragged on *Rogue One* for being kinda slow and everyone dying in the end, but I kinda loved it. It's just *The Dirty Dozen* in space, which by the way we *need* to sit down and watch that sometime. There are so many big names in it, you'll love it, trust me. Donald Sutherland is in it and he's such a child. You've seen him before, he was President Snow in *Hunger Games*."

“Okay, this one is a gem. It would never fly today because it’s kind of a comedy set in a POW camp in World War Two, but William Holden carries it on his back. Totally deserved his Oscar for this. It’s a whodunit mystery about who betrayed the Americans during an escape attempt and Holden got framed so he tries to clear his name. And I know the subject matter is pretty dark, but trust me it’s super funny.”

“Bob Fosse is a genius and even though he’s kind of a total scumbag human being, I will never hear a bad word against anything he has ever made. End of story. Fuck, now I want to watch this later tonight. Do you want to? The sets are gorgeous and the dancing is amazing.”

She continued this walking infomercial for the length of the exhibit. The only thing she was stumped on was a couple of the older sports movies, though she went into length about *Caddyshack* as it’s one of her favorites.

“You know...” I said as we walked from the Documentary section toward the Comedies, “you could probably do that for a living one day. You know, become a director.”

“What?” she asked. “Noooo... but do you think so?”

“Absolutely! You love old movies and you love bossing people around. You’re going to be Head Cheerleader next year, right? Just think of that as training for running a film set. The only difference is you’ll get paid to boss people around. Next year can be like your trial run.”

She thought it over in her head. “Maybe. Yeah. I’ll think about it. Oh God, it’s the scrunchie! Come on, I *love* Heathers so much! Here, come see!”

Ashley hated discussing the future. I think it gave her anxiety. But I’d love to say I was the wife of the woman winning an Oscar one day. Seeing her up on stage in some big flowing gown worth more than I’d make in a year with an entire auditorium cheering for her and her thanking me for being her most devout supporter in her acceptance speech is kind of my dream. I want what’s best for her and if I can brag a little that my girl won the biggest award in that field, I’d be quite satisfied with life.

When we reached the end of the exhibit, Ashley was in a state of bliss. “That was fun.” She paused and suddenly looked concerned. “Was I talking too much?”

“What? No. You love this kinda thing. Talk about it all you want.”

She gave one last longing look at the displays before heading for the elevator. Neither of us are big fans of “history” history so there really wasn’t anything else we wanted to look at. The curator gave us a little wave as we left and headed for the car. I scanned the list when we buckled up. It was still kinda early so we decided to drive around for a little bit and just talk. The topic of boys came up, as it always does, and we decided to laugh at their expense.

“So how about Michelle is thinking of asking Frank to Prom,” Ash said as we sat at a red light. “So dumb, right?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think they’re cute together.”

“She still hasn’t told me if they’ve hooked up or not. You’d think being friends since kindergarten would mean sharing if you’ve fucked the running back.” She laughed.

“Speaking of sharing,” I began with a mocking tone, “word on the street is Spencer is going to make a move on you this summer.”

She gagged. “Christ, please, no. I do *not* want to deal with that.”

“I don’t know, Ash. I feel like being named Head Cheerleader means you’re going to have to sleep with him sooner or later. You the cheerleader, him the quarterback. Might as well bite the bullet and get it over with. Who knows? He might even be good.”

“I will pull over and throw you out of this car,” she warned.

"Whenever he does, you wanna know what I'm gonna do? I'll be sure to get right up in his doughy face and just scream 'Don't even think of touching my girlfriend, you skeez.' That'll get the message across, I think."

"Aww I love it when you get all protective of me and shit," she cooed. I blew her a kiss. "So did you want to stick to your list and go straight to dinner?" she asked. "Because I am not hungry at all."

"That's a first," I said. She reached over and punched me in the shoulder. "Kidding!"

"But seriously, what do you wanna do?"

"We could just go back to your place and watch a movie or something," I suggested. "I'm getting kinda tired so it'd be nice to just relax for a bit."

"Wanna watch one of the movies from the museum?" she asked. "I'm pretty sure Dad left most of his DVD collection in the office."

"Hey, it's your birthday. We can watch whatever you want," I offered. She smiled and headed back to her place.

Her Dad did leave a bunch of movies in his little study. He had to have bought hundreds of them over the years. An entire bookcase was dedicated to holding them and they were all sorted by genre, name, and year. It was like a Blockbuster in there. I can see where Ashley gets her neurotic tendencies from.

She scanned the shelves while I checked my phone. She told me no peeking so I had to have my back turned for the whole thing. One thing about Ash is she is extremely indecisive when it comes to picking movies. Almost five minutes passed after she turned me around in the office chair to keep the choice a secret. She was taking so long that I felt like I had to say something.

"You okay back there?" I called out.

"Don't be impatient," she said.

"Just wanted to make sure you didn't hurt yourself or anything!"

"Thanks, asshole."

I smirked and went back to checking Twitter. About a minute later, the chair was forcibly spun around. Ashley held a DVD case up to my face. My eyes couldn't read it at first from the shock of being turned into a dreidel so I had to back up a bit to read it.

"I'll let you decide. Three choices. First option is Sixteen Candles."

"Ehh," I said. Not exactly my first choice.

She retracted the case and held up a second one. "Next up... Bridge to Terabithia."

"Do you want to see me cry?" I asked. "I will cry. And it will be ugly. Do you want to make your girlfriend ugly cry on your birthday?"

"It's a sweet movie!" she countered. "We can just do what we did when we watched Marley and Me and turn it off when things are doing great and pretend the ending never happens."

"I had a massive crush on AnnaSophia Robb when I was younger," I said with a little smirk. "My Dad thought I watched it every day because I really liked the little monsters."

"Funny," she said as she switched cases. "I was staring at Zooey Deschanel the whole time." She showed me the final option. "Rocky Horror."

"I still don't understand that," I said. "I listened to the soundtrack like you asked, but it's just... weird."

"Did you watch the movie?"

"I never got around to it."

"Unacceptable," she said. "Go to the living room. I'll get the rice and bread."

“The what now?”

“We’re going to see it after finals,” she stated. “There’s a theater a few miles away that shows it one Saturday every month. It’s always packed, but they’ll make room for you.” She exhaled sharply and smiled wide. “I can wear my French maid outfit!”

“That sounds incredibly hot, but I have no idea what you’re talking about right now.”

“Oh, just go to the living room already,” she groaned.

I did as I was told. I regretted not choosing *Sixteen Candles*. I think it was the fact that we’ve watched it like twice now and I wasn’t feeling like seeing it again. Ashley isn’t the *biggest* Broadway fan, but she absolutely adores a select list of shows and *Rocky Horror* is right at the top of the list. She’s been begging me to go to a show with her like the one she mentioned, but one of us ended up always being too busy.

I sat on the couch and stared at the wall while I waited for her. Without warning, she leapt over the couch and landed beside me, scaring the shit out of me. After I finished jumping and possibly shitting my pants a little, she booped me on the nose with a giant baguette and waited for me to take it.

“What happened to the French maid outfit?” I asked.

“Make it through the whole movie and maybe I’ll try it on for you.” She winked and ran over to the DVD player, leaving a ziplock bag full of rice beside me. I felt like I was going grocery shopping with my wife instead of watching a weird movie with my girlfriend. “I’ll tell you when to use that stuff. It’s pretty straight forward.”

“Oh, really?” I asked. “You know I still have no idea what’s going on right now.”

“That’s part of the fun, silly. It’ll make sense in context.”

“Will it?”

She thought about it. “Probably not, no.” She bent over and put the DVD in.

“You sure you don’t want to watch something a bit more simple like... I don’t know... Mr. Popper’s Penguins?”

“Excuse you,” she snapped, “I offered to take you to a show two months ago and you said no. Don’t get upset that you’re out of the loop here.” She sat down beside me and got all cozy under her fuzzy blanket.

“I’m sorry I got the stomach flu that week. I promise I’ll do better at avoiding crippling plagues next time.”

“You fuckin’ better. Now shut up, it’s starting.” She glanced over and saw me frowning at her. She blew me a kiss. “Love you, boo. Now stay ready with that bread. It’ll happen quicker than you think.”

I did not know what I thought was going to happen with the bread and it seemed like it took halfway until the movie before she started screaming at me to tear it apart and throw the chunks at the TV. I panicked and just went for it. Large pieces of perfectly good baguette found themselves littering her nice clean floor. Until that happened however, I was clutching the stick of bread like a soldier landing on Normandy. I think she just wanted to see me on edge the whole time, afraid I would disappoint her if I messed up my one task. And then some wedding scene happened and she started throwing grains of rice at the TV and pleaded for me to do the same.

What kind of movie requires a cleanup after? The movie isn’t a porno. Well, not really. The blonde robot guy in the G-string was kinda hot.

Even after seeing it and participating in it, I had no idea what happened.

“Wasn’t that fun?” she asked with the widest smile on her face as the credits rolled.

I was sitting upright, stiff as a board. I had never felt more out of place than I did in that moment right there. “Yep. Totally awesome, babe. Never better.”

“We are so seeing that live show after Finals are over,” she said. “God, it’s gonna be great! Maybe they’ll take you up on stage and mess around with you. You being a virgin and all.”

“Huh?”

“Anyone who’s never been to a Rocky Horror screening or performance gets brought up on stage and messed around with. It’s a big tradition. They’re called *virgins* and we all point and laugh at them. I remember when I lost my virginity. That was a fun night.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about being pointed and laughed at in front of a room of people, but if it makes you happy then I’m sure I’ll find a way to endure the crippling anxiety.” She smiled and held my hand. “Now about this whole ‘losing my virginity’ thing you were talking about.”

Worst pickup line ever and part of me feels ashamed she actually fell for it, but we were making out amidst a room covered in half-destroyed baguette and spilled grains of rice within seconds.

Best birthday ever.

It was nearly seven when we began passing out on the couch. We started talking for a little after the movie ended and we found ourselves falling asleep in each other’s arms. It was such a nice day and I hated that it was ending, but we both woke up about an hour later, groggy and confused, and we knew it was time to end the day. Ashley offered to drive, but I knew she needed to write a big paper that was due on Monday. She was also very tired and I feared we would crash on the way to my house.

We shared one last kiss before I began my walk home. I will never forget that day for as long as I live.

My house was only about a half-hour walk from Ashley’s house, maybe more if I take my time. I didn’t fear being abducted or anything. That was probably foolish of me. My neighborhood was quite safe so I made my way back to my house.

Something shifted in my backpack as soon as I went back into my room. I couldn’t remember what it could be as I had taken all of the party favors out to annoy Ash back in her room. I touched the bottom of the bag and my jaw dropped. How could I forget?! That little voice in my mind told me I had to choose: Wait and bring it to her house tomorrow while she’s working on her homework or go back now and celebrate a little bit more with my girlfriend.

Because I was an idiot who couldn’t be away from her for more than an hour without feeling lonely, I instantly turned and hurried back to the house. Deciding I wanted to surprise her again, I didn’t send her a warning text. I broke into her house once. What’s one more time?

Opening the door, I quietly entered. I was going to scare the shit out of her. It was going to be hilarious. I had the little Tupperware container with the German chocolate cake slices inside. The coconut topping had smashed against the top of the container and the two pieces had become crumbled and split to pieces from getting bounced around in my bag, but cake was cake. She loved German chocolate. I crept up the stairs and headed for her room. Her door was slightly ajar. I could hear some kinda music playing from inside. Light seeped out into the otherwise pitch-black hallway.

## Ashley

After Lauren left, I threw on Bob Fosse's classic *All That Jazz*, something I had made up my mind that I wanted to rewatch as soon as I saw the exhibit on it in the museum. It's one of my all-time favorite movies so it only seemed right that I would see it on my birthday, depressing as it might be. It turns out I already had the DVD in and I had paused the movie from when I tried to watch it weeks ago. Even though I was halfway through, I decided to just go for it and finish it. I have a thing about rewatching a movie from the beginning if I couldn't finish it the last time I tried. It just bores me, even if I loved it.

The second way I was going to celebrate my birthday was sitting in my dresser drawer. I had been fantasizing about it since I woke up. For the past two weeks, it's really all I could think of, fucked as that may be. Finals meant I couldn't party as much as I would have liked. Kara made Stacey give it to me for free and it was everything I needed to take the edge off an otherwise dull day. Just what the doctor ordered. Lauren made sure my birthday was perfect so this case was very much the latter.

Pretty much perfect for any occasion, really.

I took my History textbook from my bag and set it on the floor. My debit card in hand, I prepared two nice lines for my enjoyment. The first time I did it, Stacey bought it and Kara paid her back. They let me try it and I'd been getting it for free ever since. She was very generous with sharing.

"Perks of being the most popular girl in school," she said with a wink.

Kara was a goddess. She was drop dead gorgeous and treated me like I was worth a damn. With her support I was going to become Head Cheerleader and the queen of the school.

The movie was nearly finished when I decided it was time to celebrate. Joe Gideon was doing his final number and the crowd was going wild.

I remember having an anxiety attack the first time I saw it. The concept of death scares me. I was already beginning to suffer from depression when I first watched it at age eleven. Terrible age for someone to watch this movie, really. Seeing this fictional character slowly waste away really affected me. I didn't want to leave anyone I loved behind. But more importantly, I didn't want to die and have nothing to show for it. Being gone before I do something with my life is my biggest fear. Watching the movie again and again lessened the blow, pardon the pun, but the existential crisis remained in my mind.

I knew I had to make something of my life. I don't know what it will be, but I knew Lauren would be by my side for it. She was pushing for me to become a director. I thought that would be cool, but it was scary. An entire movie or TV show resting on your every move? That's too anxiety-inducing for someone like me.

I pressed the curled up novelty \$1,000,000 bill to my nose and prepared for some artificial joy. Seeing Joe Gideon do a ton of drugs over the past half-hour plus made me envy him. I was finally going to get my high and cap off a perfect, perfect day.

My door creaked open and I stared up right as I was about to inhale, scared that someone broke in.

The hallway was dark so I couldn't recognize who was in the doorway until she stepped into the light. Her blonde hair was the first thing I saw. The fake bill dropped from my hands and uncurled on the ground below me. Time stood still as we stared at each other. I was as shocked to see her as she was to see me. Her eyes darted from me to the coke and back to me over and over. It was like she was hoping she could blink and it would disappear like a trick of the light or a monster in a game.

Except the lines never disappeared. There was only me, Lauren, some cocaine, and the upbeat music playing over my speakers that beckoned Joe Gideon to his death.

“What are you doing?!” she cried.

“It’s not what it looks like,” I said. What a pathetic lie.

“Please tell me that’s not what that is,” she begged me. “Please.”

“What?” I looked down at the white powder as if it were thrown at me and I was being forced to use it. “Wait, no Laur, no, don’t worry it’s nothing bad it’s just for my sinuses and I need to crush it to...”

My word vomit betrayed me as bad as poorly as actually seeing the drugs did. My mind was racing a million miles a minute.

*“At least I won’t have to lie to ya anymore!”* Joe Gideon said to his ex-wife Audrey as he prepared to depart this life and gave her one last joke to make her smile.

Lauren backed away slowly into the darkness of the hallway. She couldn’t bring herself to speak. Her mouth was wide, but no sound emerged.

“Please let me explain—” I pleaded.

“I can’t do this...” she said, shaking her head, slowly at first, then frantically as her whole body began to shake. “We... we can’t be together. Not now, not-not anymore, I’m sorry, but we... I can’t be with someone like you.”

“What?”

“I can’t be with a drug addict. Ashley, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Lauren retreated into the shadowy embrace of the hallway. “Don’t let this ruin your life. Please.”

I couldn’t believe what I just heard. The words echoed in my head, but I couldn’t make sense of it. I was too much of a coward to chase after her. Part of me knew it was over. There was nothing I could do to save this. My body was frozen to the floor. She would never love a loser like me. A drug addict. Even though I loved her more than life itself, nothing would ever be the same.

The movie said it best as the background singers sang Joe off to his death.

*Bye-bye, your life, goodbye. Bye-bye, your life, goodbye. Bye-bye, your life, goodbye. Bye-bye, your life, goodbye.*

The light of my life really was being snuffed out before my eyes.

She wouldn’t so much as look me in the eyes again until we randomly met up at a party over the summer. I nearly failed my finals because of how shitty I felt over everything. She was just one row away and I knew she was never coming back. We somehow missed the “End of the Year Party” on June 4th. That was the night Spencer and I started to become a thing.

She ran into me at the one next month. It was the big Fourth of July Party. When she walked in on me, Brooke, Stacey, and Elena doing blow in the bathroom, I was waiting for my turn. She stopped dead in her tracks and looked at me with pure sorrow and disdain. I was the most pitiful creature that ever existed.

What I didn’t know what that was the same night Lauren began hooking up with this new girl named Bethany Hill. They wouldn’t officially become a thing for another month. I saw them kissing in her car after cheer practice one day. She quit the squad over the summer to focus on volleyball. They looked so happy.

It was the second time I ever really thought about committing suicide. It wouldn’t be the last.

## **THE FUNERAL**



## Ashley

I watched a slideshow of her life pass by in ten second intervals. She should have had a thousand more.

Each photo showed her as she aged from infancy to young adulthood. A picture of her crawling around in diapers. A picture of her being held by her grandmother. One of her in a shopping cart with a giant lollipop in her tiny little hands. Another of her wading in the kiddie pool. Another of her playing fourth grade soccer and another of her playing volleyball on the beach. Her first date in seventh grade with Danny Gray, both of their awkward smiles flashing their braces for the camera. Her Freshman year Homecoming dress that made me screech like a happy bat when I first saw it. Her first volleyball game with Lauren. Her Junior Homecoming picture with Frank, the first time anyone had seen them together. Picture after picture of her birthdays and her at weddings and her enjoying the best parts of life. And finally a picture of her in a gorgeous red dress that would have been for her final Homecoming. A dress she would never get to wear again.

When the slideshow ended, the screen faded to black for a moment before some final words appeared.

### **IN MEMORY OF MICHELLE WILSON (2001-2019)**

On the road down to New Orleans, the car got hit by a truck driven by a drunk driver. Michelle's parents were relatively okay because their car got t-boned right where Michelle was sitting in the backseat. Besides some scratches and her Mom suffering a messed up right hip, they were more or less fine. Michelle didn't survive the trip to the hospital. They didn't even make it out of Texas.

In light of the crash, classes were canceled on Tuesday for people to attend the funeral. Michelle was one of the most popular girls in school, and not in a conceited way. Everyone loved her to death. The faculty knew no one from the Junior or Senior classes was going to show up. Anyone who did would be seen as an insensitive asshole who didn't want to be at the funeral. People still didn't show up, though. I couldn't blame them. I didn't even think I would make it. Forcing myself to go was hell. I stayed up half the night before drinking.

The wake on Monday afternoon went by at a snail's pace. I was one of the first people in the building, alongside Lauren, Casey, and Heather. We were some of her closest friends, with Lauren the closest of us all. Seeing her in the casket was so strange. We had just been in the hallways together a few days prior. And now she was gone.

A lot of people did show up. More than I expected. Spencer sent flowers, but couldn't make it because of his recovery. The thought that they both went through the same kind of accident within the span of a few weeks was crazy. They both could have died for the same reason. I wondered if Spencer was taking it hard. Why did he get to live but Michelle had to die? It would have been spooky if we'd lost two people to car accidents in less than a month.

At one point during the wake, Michelle's mom began to cry so hard that she had to be taken outside. There wasn't a dry eye in the room. Except me. I had no more tears left to shed.

After I found out from Michelle's father that she was gone, I called Lauren. I didn't know who else to call. I tried to justify it as me trying to tell her that one of her best friends had just gotten in an accident and she deserved to know, but part of me just wanted her to be there for me. I felt so selfish afterward. Hearing her cry destroyed me.

As soon as I found out about what had happened, I started to drink. I had been sober for just over two weeks before that. No alcohol, no cocaine, no weed, nothing. But I drank my house dry that day. I'd drink until I was sick, pass out, wake up, and drink some more. I missed class on Monday and almost missed the funeral. If I hadn't asked Lauren to pick me up, I absolutely would have and then I would have drank again because I would have felt so guilty about it. It was the first time in my life I'd ever binge-drunk before. Three straight days of drinking and puking my guts out. I'm shocked I didn't die of alcohol poisoning. It's more than I deserve. I don't deserve to die and feel nothing ever again.

Lauren told me that when she came over after I called her, she found me drunkenly stumbling around the house crying and screaming for Michelle and asking where she was. I didn't even remember making the phone call to be completely honest. She just sort of appeared and I knew she was judging me. Lauren said I was worried I tried to overdose or something. My eyes were fuzzy and I couldn't walk straight so she helped me to bed. I thought she was trying to have sex with me and I actually started to strip my clothes off. She stopped me and reminded me what had happened. That was when we began to cry. We cried for what I guess was hours together. Hours of passing out, waking up, her holding my hair while I threw up, crying more, and more sleeping. At least, that's what she told me. I can't remember a thing.

Before the funeral began, Casey and Heather started talking to each other.

"I still can't believe she's gone," Heather muttered.

"I know," Casey responded.

"Do you think they're going to talk about this in school tomorrow?" Heather asked. "Like do one of those assemblies that they did the week after Grace killed herself or whatever?"

"I hope not," Casey complained. "Everyone's going to be really depressed and I don't want everyone to be even more bummed out."

At that point, Lauren turned back to look at them from the row in front of us. She had fresh tears streaming down her face and even though she wanted to tell them to shut up, nothing came out. Beth spoke for them when she turned around and shot the girls a death stare that shut them right up. I sat beside them and watched it happen. I was glad Beth shut them down. They're sweethearts, but they can be so dense at the worst of times.

The funeral as a whole was very well attended. I'm not sure what the right term for the pastor that oversaw the ceremony was, but he was nice. I'm not religious so being there felt weird. It could have been the hangover, though. I felt like I was going to die. The guy gave a speech about the fragility of life and how every life is sacred. Typical funeral stuff.

It clicked in my head that it was Michelle's birthday. She would have turned eighteen. Old enough to buy and smoke cigarettes, fight in wars, have a driver's license. She had her entire life ahead of her. So much potential snuffed out by some drunken bastard that couldn't just get an Uber. Life isn't fair. Good people die for nothing. Now we all sit here and cry and think about what could have been while that guy gets to rot in prison for a few years before being let out on good behavior so they can make room for the nonviolent drug offenders that serve life sentences for a gram of weed.

"What am I doing here?"

I stood and left, leaving the people around me confused.

When I got outside, I hurried down the stairs. I nearly tripped from the heels I was wearing, but caught myself on the steps. At the base of the stairs, I turned back and looked at the front doors. Part of me was trying to convince myself to go back. To get one last look at my once-best friend before she was

gone forever. The other part wanted to see if someone would come after me. The selfish part that I wished was in that casket instead of Michelle.

No one came. So I turned and walked away.

I drove through downtown Arlington in a desperate attempt to clear my head. I shut the radio off after I pulled out of the parking lot. All the songs were either depressingly slow or nauseatingly upbeat. I'd rather just be alone with my thoughts than listen to some millionaire sing about how melancholic their life is or how much dick they suck on a daily basis.

At the end of the day, my thoughts were all I was left with when I turned the computer off and stared at the ceiling until four in the morning. They played on a loop for hours and hours. Sometimes if I was lucky it would be a different string of criticism and self-hatred. Depression can get awfully repetitive after a while.

*It should have been you, you know. I mean, why shouldn't it be you? You're the drug addict who can't hold a stable relationship. You're the Head Cheerleader who hasn't been to a practice in days. Do you think they even know you left the church? You saw those old people glare at you for obstructing their view. You're a roadblock. And Spencer, he didn't deserve to crash his car. He probably was thinking about you when he did.*

As I drove out of the city and into the country, I saw a lone tree coming up ahead.

*You know, if he really did do it on purpose, it'd be your fault. You could have stopped him. All you had to do was delay him for a little while and talk him out of it. How hard could that be? He's as dumb as a sack of rocks. Do you wish someone was going to talk to you now? You could do it, too, you know. The tree is right there...*

I sped by the tree. I started to hyperventilate.

*Imagine how... poetic it would be if you crashed your car on the exact same tree that almost killed your ex and just killed your old bestie. And just imagine how much love you would get after the accident! Lauren would cry and cry about how she could have done more for you and saved you. And think about it: your secret would be buried forever and your name would be forever linked to Spencer's because you went out the same way that nearly killed him. Then you could go to Heaven or Hell whatever you believe in and when Lauren dies, you spend eternity with your beloved and nobody would be the wiser. I'm sure someone from school would write a short story about that in college for their creative writing class one day.*

All of these thoughts sped through my mind at the speed of sound. I felt my chest beginning to tighten up. I thought I was going to be sick or something. That was when I started to get dizzy and lose the ability to breathe. I felt like I was choking. In a panic, I pulled over and nearly took someone's mailbox out. I leapt out of the car and stumbled onto the lawn. My throat was on fire. I was gasping for short gulps of air. I thought if I didn't get something in my body, I was going to stop breathing altogether.

And then it passed.

I stared up at the sky, my chest rapidly rising and falling, and stared at the clouds. I wished I hadn't started breathing again. I wish that had been it. Done in by a panic attack. Nobody stopped their cars to check on me. Eventually the homeowners would come back and see a dead teenage girl on their front lawn.

But I survived. So I got back in the car and drove off.

I got a call on my phone ten minutes later. It was Casey. Not wanting to worry her, I answered. I hate worrying people. "Hello?"

"Hey, Ash, are you okay?" she asked.

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Well hey, where are you?” she asked. “Practice is in ten minutes!”

I hadn’t realized I had been driving for so long. Michelle had already been put in the ground, the lunch that was planned was long over, and the cheer squad was meeting for their unskippable practice that a bunch of the girls tried to have called off considering the circumstances, but our coach insisted we do regardless. I guess she thought the team bonding experience would fix things. I didn’t get to give my opinion on it, which really would have just been ten minutes of uninterrupted cursing for trying to make us work the same day that Michelle was being buried. I was too drunk to respond to the group text.

“Something came up.”

“But you haven’t been here in over a week! What’s going on? Why’d you leave the funeral so quickly? Me and Heather were worried about you.”

*So worried that they didn’t bother to run after you or call until they needed something from you...*

“Nothing. Just forget it. I’m not coming back.”

“Wait what?” she asked. “What do you mean? Wait, hold on, it’s Stacey.”

Stacey must have stolen the phone. “Ash? What the fuck, where are you?”

“I quit. I’ll see you on Monday.” I hung up.

One of my final bridges was burnt. My friends hate me for bailing on them and I lost the only group of people I ever cared about, even if that group was filled with some of the cruelest and most petty pieces of shit I’d ever have the misfortune of knowing. The only sport I could mentally handle. In hindsight, I probably could have handled that a little bit better. What else could I have possibly said to make them not hate me? I had to rip the bandaid off and just get it over with.

Now everyone hates me. I let them down. There was no going back now.

I was just about to walk into my mother’s room when I heard the doorbell ring. Deciding I should just send whoever showed up on their way, I went down to the front door. I had a bottle of my mom’s cheapest wine in my hand that I was trying to open when the bell rang I didn’t even have the energy to call out to stop knocking. Leaving the chain lock in, I cracked the door open.

Kate was staring back at me with concerned eyes. “What’s going on with you?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“Ash, you’re a mess. What’s going on?”

“Nice to see you, too,” I said bitterly. “Just leave me alone.” I tried to shut the door, but she stuck her foot inside. I looked at her with pure exhausted annoyance. “Seriously?”

“Please let me in,” Kate pleaded.

As much as I wanted to send her away, there was no stopping her. In my drunken state, I saw no other option but to undo the chain and usher her inside. We headed for my room. It was a mess. I hadn’t made an attempt to clean it in weeks. There were empty bottles of wine and whiskey and beer and pretty much anything else I could get my hands on scattered around the floor with all my dirty clothes and empty takeout bags. I just wanted to go to sleep. She kept me awake, though. I was spaced out for most of the conversation I had no intention to have. I came back to when I heard her bring up Spencer’s name.

“It’s not your fault he crashed,” she said.

“I could have stopped him from driving off,” I said, my eyes struggling to stay up. “Or I could have made him take me with him. Maybe he wouldn’t have crashed if I was there...”

She shook her head and held my hands, trying to be reassuring. “We don’t know what was going through his head when he was driving. We don’t know if it was an accident or if he... you know...”

“Does it matter? If I was there, I could have—”

“Don’t blame yourself!” she exclaimed, startling me a little. “Thinking you could have saved him isn’t healthy. If you go your whole life thinking you could have prevented bad things from happening, you’re going to turn yourself into a husk. There was nothing that could have been done for him and there’s nothing we can do now for...” Her voice broke. “For Michelle.”

I didn’t regret getting out of the funeral. But I wish I could have seen her one last time. I didn’t deserve to be her friend. I knew she always kind of resented me for making her pick sides. I never even got the chance to explain myself. She was going to be one of the first ones I ever came out to. She didn’t even know why she was forced to pick sides to begin with.

“I know why you’re upset,” Kate went on, “believe me. I’d be sad if I were you, too. But Spencer’s accident was exactly that: an accident. It was nobody’s fault. Not Spencer’s not yours, not mine, not the truck’s. Nobody. And if you don’t believe me, go talk to him. I’m going over to his house tomorrow after school to give him his homework. Would you like to come with me?”

I shook my head. “I’d rather go alone.”

“That’s perfectly okay, too,” she responded. “Do whatever makes you most comfortable. I’ll tell him you’re going to be there sometime soon and tell him to look out for you. How’s that sound?”

“Thank you. And say hi to his little sister for me. We haven’t spoken in a long time.”

“I will. I promise

“Thank you.”

“Do you need anything?” she asked. “Can I get you something?”

“No,” I quickly said, not wanting to be a burden. “But thank you. I’ll be fine.” I glanced over at the clock and it dawned on me what time it was. “Wait... how’d you get here anyway?”

“Took the bus from the church and then walked here.”

“But that bus doesn’t let you off anywhere near here,” I pointed out. I had to take the bus anywhere I wanted to go before my mom bought me my car. Casey’s house is kind of near the church so I know how far away it is. “And it’s almost a twenty minute walk from the bus stop to here.”

She nodded and gave a little smile. “Got my steps in for the day.”

“Come on,” I said as I stood up and reached for my keys on my desk. “I’m driving you home. You’re not walking that far again. It’s gonna be dark out soon.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “You’re not...” she motioned to the bottles on the floor.

I held the unopened bottle upside down in the air. “You caught me before I could get the corkscrew. I’m fine. Trust me, I’m not driving drunk any time soon.”

Even though I didn’t want to spend any more time with people today than I had to, I wasn’t going to let her get abducted. I figured it could wait a little bit longer. One more good deed, I guess. Kate only lives about fifteen minutes from my house with traffic. Just get her home and then go back here and finish this.

I instinctively hooked up my phone to listen to my own music. After we pulled out and got to the intersection by my house, I reached down to turn on the first song in the randomized cue. My heart sank when I heard that song play again. I had been listening to it on repeat all afternoon. It was the song I’d heard on the worst day of my life. It was fitting that I listen to it today as well. Roy Scheider was a surprisingly decent singer.

“What’s this song?” Kate asked with concern as the song played.

“Nothing,” I said nervously. “You can turn it.”

Kate wasted no time turning to the next song. Because it was on Shuffle, we went from a depressing show tune to an upbeat Taylor Swift song from the 2000's. Music is weird like that, I suppose. But Kate still looked concerned about the subject matter of the previous song.

"It's from a good movie," I said.

"Sounds pretty depressing," Kate said.

"So is most of the music today."

"Yeah," Kate said. "I guess so."

We sat in silence as we seemed to hit every red light in the city. I was fuming over the heavy rush hour traffic when Kate leaned over and asked, "I'm kinda hungry. Do you wanna get food?"

My stomach had been growling for hours. I barely ate since I got the phone call. I hoped not eating would make me get drunk faster so I wouldn't get a chance to have second thoughts. Much as I love Katie, I didn't want to go anywhere. But I didn't want to disappoint her.

"Yeah sure, where to?"

We went to this little diner that had really good sandwiches. They gave out big pickle slices with everything you ordered. It's really the only reason I went there semi-regularly. Kate had never been so I figured I should be the one to take her there. When we walked inside and waited to be seated, I saw that Lauren had called me twice since I left the funeral.

"You go ahead and get the table," I said. "I'm gonna call Lauren real quick."

"Yeah, sure," Kate said.

I stepped outside to make the call. It took me forever to click the Call Back button. I'd never been good at talking to people over the phone. Given what she probably wanted to talk about, it only made it more of a struggle to finally hit the button and raise the phone up to my ear. It only rang once before she picked up.

"Ash? Hey, where are you? Are you alright?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good. I'm getting dinner with Kate. What's up? Why'd you call?"

I could hear her exhale, as if all her stress and built-up anxiety just fizzled away in an instant. "Uh... well, I saw you left the funeral a little early and I just wanted to be sure you're alright. You know, with everything that happened."

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said, rather unconvincingly.

"You sure?" she asked with genuine concern, something that no one seemed to have anymore. "Casey and Heather told me you said something about not knowing what you were doing and then you just left. What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Her worrying only made me hurt more. I regretted making that phone call so badly. It only picked at old wounds. I couldn't let myself cry before I went back inside. If I started crying, I'd just end up ditching Kate so I could get back home.

"I just had to get out of there. I'm sorry."

"What? No, no, no, don't be, you're okay! Can I help?"

"No," I said. "I'm okay."

"Could I come out with you guys?"

Seeing her one last time might be enough to finally send me over the edge. If a phone call could make me want to step in front of a bus, thinking about seeing her in person could be my tipping point. I needed it. I needed her.

"If you want," I said after some careful thought. "Will Beth be coming, too?"

"Yeah, she's here right now," she answered. Then she hesitated. "Is that okay?"

“Well now that she knows you’re talking about her, yeah,” I said with a little dry laugh. “She can come if she wants. I’ll text you the address. We’ve been here before.”

I hung up the phone and considered throwing it down an open storm drain. But they were expecting the address so I felt obligated to give it to them. Plus my Mom might want my phone after everything is said and done.

“Did she answer?” Kate asked as I sat down.

“Yeah,” I said. “They’re gonna be here soon.”

They arrived about twenty minutes later. Just seeing her walking toward me brought back old memories.

It was where we had our third date. I got there early again, just like last time. We chose this restaurant because it was small and kinda far from the school. Less risk of being caught. She wore this absolutely breathtaking white dress with red accents. I thought she was about to ask me to go to the theater or something with her.

“God, I feel so underdressed,” I finally joked after regaining the ability to speak.

She laughed and said, “You look beautiful the way you are. You don’t need a dress.”

I told myself I would marry this girl one day as soon as those words left her lips. She just had a way of making me feel so comfortable with myself. I didn’t need makeup to make me look like a million bucks when I had the greatest girlfriend ever to make me feel better about myself.

Now she sat beside me in a t-shirt and jeans and a look that screamed worry for my well being. Kate was now our friend and Beth was the new girlfriend that replaced me. Nothing was the same as it used to be.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make it to the funeral,” Kate said after we sat quietly for a little while. “Family stuff I couldn’t get out of.”

“No need to explain,” Lauren said. “She thought you were really sweet, you know.”

Kate gave her a sad smile that sent us all back to silence.

I glanced across the table and saw Beth staring at me. It wasn’t the same stare she gave me in the gym during the dodgeball game on the first day of the year. It was more of an observational stare. She was reading me like a good book. I stared back for a moment so she knew I knew what she was doing before turning back to this particularly interesting colorful blob on the tabletop. It seemed to stand out among the thousand other random half-shapes that decorated the wood.

Our food arrived, but I couldn’t bring myself to eat anything more than a single fry. Just eating that was like eating sandpaper. My stomach was screaming at me to stop being so stubborn and actually take care of myself. I didn’t listen.

Lauren gave me a nudge on the shoulder. “You not hungry?”

“No,” I said. “I’ll get a box for later.”

Lauren took a slow bite from her burger. I could tell she felt bad about eating while I just sat there. I figured I could just finish it later. I paid for it, after all.

“So, Ash,” Beth said, breaking her own personal vow of silence, “did you hear about some of the themes for Homecoming this year?”

Lauren smiled a little and perked up in her chair. She and Beth looked very excited.

Being in charge of the Homecoming Committee meant that I would have final say in what theme we went with. I guess it was better late than never to get this over with. Considering Homecoming is only in a couple more weeks, it was about time we talked about this.

“No,” I said. “What is it?”

Lauren perked up a bit. “Well, we had a few ideas. How about... *Just A Generic High School Homecoming*.”

“I... I don’t get it,” I said. “Like we just go to Homecoming?”

“Exactly!” Lauren happily squealed. “Literally nothing special happens and we all just show up, dance, and then go get wasted afterward. It’s just another dumb dance that none of us actually want to be at.”

“It’s also financially responsible,” Beth explained. “Less money on cheesy gimmicks means more money for Prom, Snow Ball, the musical, and other activities.”

I remembered the last time I got wasted at a high school party. Hard pass. Maybe this idea was the best. I decided to hear the other options out, though. “I feel like people would be unhappy with there being absolutely nothing special about it. It *is* Homecoming, after all.”

“See, I told you she’d hate it,” Kate said to Lauren. Lauren stuck her tongue out. I was kinda surprised Kate heard about these ideas before I did. It was nice to see she was getting closer with them. She deserved close friends who would be there for her.

“What else is there?” I asked.

“All Dogs Go to Heaven Under the Sea in Hawaii.” Beth did not express a single hint of enthusiasm at this suggestion and it was plain as day that it was not her idea.

I could only stare at her, my mind unable to comprehend what I just heard. “Excuse me?”

“See, I told you she wouldn’t get the reference,” Kate complained to Lauren. “Literally nobody knows what that even is anymore. It’s been... what? Ten years?”

“Oh, shut up,” Lauren said, smiling.

“I am so confused,” I said.

“It’s a YouTube thing,” Lauren began before Beth stopped her.

“Nobody gets the reference, sweetie. Face it, you lost.”

Lauren stuck her tongue out again.

“Right, okay, any other ideas?” I asked, trying to push this conversation back along.

“Well, since you’re being *so incredibly difficult*...” Lauren said as she held my hand under the table. They were very soft. Soft as I remembered. “We were thinking about doing a Hollywood theme. Like a Red Carpet Oscars thing.”

“Seriously?”

“O’Reilly doesn’t want there to be as many short skirts after multiple complaints from the PTA so he kinda forced us to do a theme that involved longer dresses,” Beth said. “Fucking prude.”

“It’s really stupid,” Kate said in agreement.

“So he approved a theme that involves movie stars looking as sexy as possible wearing whatever makes them look good?” I asked slowly while trying to make sense of an adult’s shortsighted stupidity. Some people cannot see how backwards and irrational they can be with the dumb things they ask and do. Especially adults. They think we’re all blithering idiots who can’t handle the most basic trains of thought and feel the need to dumb everything down so we can “get it.”

“I’m not complaining,” Lauren said. “My dress is hotter than the sun and it just screams Hollywood starlet.” She gave a little pose with one hand behind her head.

“Are you going?” Kate asked me.

“What’s the point?” I asked. “I don’t have a date. I’m not gonna win Queen. Casey and Heather are going to break off with whoever asked them—”

“Why don’t you go with us?” Lauren asked, breaking up my depressing train of thought.



“Um...” I hesitated, not sure exactly how to throw them off my trail. I didn’t want to make commitments I had no intention of carrying out. Not now. “Look, that’s really nice of you, but I don’t wanna be a third wheel.”

“You should,” Beth said warmly. “Go with us, I mean.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, of course,” she said. “Why shouldn’t you be allowed to have a good time like the rest of us? It’s not like the two of us have ‘dates’ anyway.” She looked at Lauren and gave her a little knowing smirk.

“Going single for a third year in a row is gonna suck,” Lauren said, returning Beth’s smile with a smile of her own.

Beth looked back at me. “So why don’t the three of us be dateless together?”

I pointed at Kate. “What about her?”

“Oh, don’t worry about her,” Lauren advised. “We have plans for her so she doesn’t end up a pathetic loser like the rest of us.”

“Ouch,” Beth said with feigned anguish.

Kate looked mortified. “Uh, hey, that’s really not necessary. I’m fine with staying home.”

Lauren glared at her. “Shut up. You’re going to Homecoming. And you’re gonna look hot and your date won’t be able to keep his hands off of you. Consensually, of course, or I’ll fucking kill him.”

She could be such a mom when she wanted to be. I loved her so much.

“She means it, too,” Beth said.

Kate checked her phone and grimaced. “Oh, crap, I need to be home by six.”

I think she was just trying to get out of there. Who has a curfew at six? With our dinner cut short, we all piled into Lauren’s car and set off for Kate’s house. Lauren said she’d bring me back to pick up my car after. I think she was worried I would just drive away. It’s not the first time I was going to ditch my car in the middle of a restaurant parking lot and probably won’t be the last. It was a little cramped inside, but we made it work. Lauren’s car is really great.

“So Kate,” I said, deciding I wanted to try and keep up appearances a little bit longer, “is there a *someone special* you’re hoping will ask you?”

“Look, I really appreciate you guys trying to get me a date,” she said, “but I was planning on staying home that night. You really don’t need to look for someone for me to go with.”

“What? Why?” Beth asked from the front seat.

“Dances like that make me depressed,” Kate explained. “My friends either have dates or have closer friends they spend the entire night with and nobody ever asked me before—”

“I seriously doubt that,” I said. There had to have been someone who’s asked her before. Even one of those silly dances we did in grade school where everyone was too young to understand what a “dance” was or even how to dance with each other.

“No. No, it’s true. Well... okay, except for Donnie Westman freshman year—”

I wanted to vomit. “You said no, *right?*”

“Of course,” Kate assured me.

“Oh, thank God,” Lauren said.

“Who’s Donnie Westman?” Beth asked.

Lauren tried to beat around the bush. It was more than he deserved. “Well... he uh...”

“He tried to diddle some eighth grader at a playground last year,” I said bluntly.

“What the fuck? Seriously?”

“Dude was held back twice so he was eighteen when it happened,” I explained. “He’s not gonna be around here for a *very* long time.”

“I bet he said they were in love,” Beth said callously.

“Yeah,” Lauren said with an equal amount of disgust. “Go fuck yourself, dude.”

“So spill,” I said to Kate. “Which hot guy do you want to ask you? Cause we can make it happen. And don’t try to change the subject again, we’re not leaving this car before her ”

I figured I could do one last altruistic act before it was all over. I felt numb to the world and even my attempts at being funny just felt like words someone else was saying. Still though, I didn’t want my last interaction with them to be negative.

“What? Nobody!”

Beth looked in the rear view mirror and grinned. “Oh my God, she’s redder than a tomato.”

“Ooooooooooh, you *like* someone,” Lauren said with mocking glee. “Soooo who is it?”

“I don’t!” Kate complained. “Come on guys, seriously? Grow up.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, trying to placate my poor little love-sick friend. “If she doesn’t wanna tell us, she doesn’t have to.” I had an idea of who it was, but recent developments may make this impossible.

Despite my call for a ceasefire, Lauren was more interested in the latest gossip and pressed the issue. “Guy or girl?”

“What? I’m not gay!” Kate called out.

“Lauren, come on, not everyone at our school is gay,” I said, getting right back on the rag-on-Kate train. “Unless it is a girl and if it is, I’ll find you someone nice. And if it’s me, I really am flattered but I just got out of a relationship and I’m not looking for anything serious right now.”

Beth and I exchanged a look in the rear view mirror. She was studying me again.

“No, Ash, please,” she said, beet red. “I’m not gay.”

“You sure?” Lauren asked. “I just get this... feeling about you. You know what I mean?”

“I think it’s the glasses,” Beth observed. “They have the cute librarian thing going some guys are super into.” Kate tore the glasses off her face and buried them in her lap. “Hmmm... no, that’s not it...”

“STOP!” Kate cried. “I DON’T WANT TO HAVE SEX WITH ANYBODY!”

I couldn’t hold it in anymore. Neither could any of them. We all broke down laughing so hard, we all cried a little. It was the first time I smiled in days. Kate looked so innocent and out of her element. I felt bad for screwing with her, but damn if it wasn’t fun to pick on her a little. Maybe we awakened something in her with all of these jokes.

“Well, if there is anything we can do,” Beth said after she stopped laughing enough to speak, “you have our numbers.”

“I’m gonna delete them soon if you don’t leave me alone!” Kate scolded.

Lauren started laughing even harder. I thought we were gonna crash at one point because she could barely keep her eyes open. In my wisdom, I pointed and laughed at her for being such a mess. I was basically asking her to crash the car by making her laugh harder.

“Look at her! Look at her!”

“Katherine, why did you break my girlfriend?” Beth calmly asked.

Kate buried her face in her hands and screamed. We continued to laugh and laugh. It was the happiest I’d been in days. It felt so bad knowing that it was going to end in a few minutes and I would be left alone again. It was also kind of liberating in a way. I was glad to know I was going out on a high note and the only people who ever remotely cared about me would have a fond memory to look back on.

When we dropped Kate off at her place, Lauren rolled down her window and shouted, "Text me later, you lovesick puppy!" Kate gave her the finger and ran to her front door. I hope she didn't take any of this personally. "Our little girl's in love."

"Darn shame," Beth said, shaking her head.

"I bet it's Frank," I said.

"Why Frank?" Lauren asked.

"Cause he's an idiot and the only person you could be embarrassed about being into," I said. "She loves a complete moron and she can't come to grips with it."

"Maybe," Beth said to herself.

We listened to loud music and sang terribly as we rode through the suburbs. I really didn't want this to end. It felt so great to feel included, to feel wanted. But this had gone on long enough. Any more of this and I might get second thoughts. Lauren seemed to sense these thoughts and looked back at me in the mirror when we pulled back into the diner's parking lot.

"Do you wanna come over to my place with us?" she asked. "Talk about Homecoming stuff?"

"No, that's okay," I said. "I don't want to annoy you two."

"How would you annoy us?" Beth asked. "It's just school stuff. We really should get a jump on it before the student council meeting tomorrow."

"I just think I should get home," I said.

"Okay," Lauren said with a smile. "Call us if you need anything."

I thanked her and departed for my own car. I really thought that was the last time we would ever see each other. I gave them a weak wave before driving off for home.

I found myself lying on my bed before I knew it, staring at the cracks I had spent countless hours watching aimlessly at night. As much as I wanted to do it, I didn't have the energy to move. It was a pathetic existence. The weight of the day finally got to me and I passed out in my bed, fully clothed and with my shoes still on.

When I woke up many hours later, I felt sick and groggy. Hungover. I needed water. Sunlight crept into the room between the gaps in my curtains. I recoiled like a vampire from the cross. I glanced over at the clock. 7:42 A.M. I already decided I wasn't going to school today. What were they gonna do? Expel me for skipping after my friend died?

Reaching over to my desk, I pulled out my phone to check the damage. It took a second to pull up all of my missed texts and calls: one missed call and three texts from Katherine, one missed call from Heather, and one missed call from Spencer. Kate and Heather left voicemails I would never listen to, but Spencer didn't. I pulled up Spencer's contact page and almost called him, but I hesitated and dropped the phone onto my bed and I went back to counting cracks.

When I finally looked back up, it was 11:47 A.M.

Glancing at my phone again, I saw even more missed calls and texts from Katherine, Lauren, Heather, Casey, Spencer, and a single one from Beth. I forgot Beth even had my number. Deciding she was the one person worth listening to because of the rarity of our positive conversations, I gave her voicemail a chance.

"Ashley? It's Beth. I'm going to be completely honest with you here for a second... I know we never saw eye-to-eye and after everything that went down last year, I never thought I'd be calling you to check up on you and... Sorry. Ignore me, I don't... I'm not good at this. Look, everyone is talking about you. People are worried you might do something to yourself. You still mean a lot to Lauren and I don't want her to lose someone else this week. Just call me back whenever you want and... we can talk. About

anything. I'm all ears. Regardless, I'll see you in school tomorrow. Lauren and I will handle Homecoming stuff. Get some rest, okay?"

For the first time ever, I was actually glad to hear from Beth. She was so nice to me at dinner and in the car. It was very humanizing to see her outside of school. Lauren must have been having a positive effect on her. Between this and the stuff with Brad, I actually think we could have become friends in another life.

*If you didn't help drive her best friend to suicide, she'd have loved to be your buddy.*

My stomach roared like a lion. I'd barely eaten in days. I went down to the kitchen to make myself something big to eat. I pulled no punches. Reheated steak I'd missed from dinner two days before, fresh bread she made last night, a glass of wine or three. I considered a big slice of chocolate cake my Mom left me, but it was close enough to a German chocolate that it made my skin crawl. I settled for a big bowl of cookies and cream.

Pulling up to my favorite spot on the couch, I checked the TV for anything good on TV at one in the afternoon. Watching TV during a school day felt so illegal. Instead of being in math class, I was dividing the amount of time it took to find something to watch by the amount of time it took for ice cream to melt. It also was a waste of time because nothing good was on.

"Coming up next..." the talk show host began. "Ten signs your boyfriend might be a cat person living in a doggie household!"

"What...?" I changed the channel.

Some corny soap opera came on next. The generic hunky thirty-something white guy held the beautiful redhead in his arms. "Baby... I would die for you!" They locked lips and seemed to never come up for air. I had to and clicked the button before I vomited.

"The Lord be with y—"

"Noooooooo." I clicked the button on instinct. Deciding there was nothing good on regular TV, I took a bite of steak and began to browse our friendly neighborhood streaming service. I only got through two shows before I heard footsteps behind me.

"There's never anything good on before three," Lauren said.

My heart leapt into my throat and I almost jumped out of my seat. "Shit! What are you doing here?! It's the middle of the day!"

"Why didn't you answer my calls?!" she asked. "I called you, like, seven times!"

"My phone was off."

"Oh, *bullshit* it was." Lauren gave me *the look*. "I was so worried about you! You can't do this to me! You need to answer your phone!"

"What's the matter with you? I'm fine!" I yelled. I instantly regretted raising my voice, but it was too late to take it back. "Trust me!"

"Uh huh, yeah, sure." She walked over and looked over my lunch. "Looks good."

I didn't respond to this. Her eyes lingered on the wine bottle for a bit too long. "How did you get in anyway?" I asked.

"Key under the gnome," she said. "The one you told me about when we were dating."

I remembered that conversation as soon as she brought it up. We discussed ways to break into each other's houses late at night when we wanted to fool around. Mom kept that key there for emergencies and said to little ten year old me that I wasn't allowed to tell *anyone* about it. Those emergencies she meant were specifically for if she was at work and couldn't get home to let me in after school if I forgot my key inside. The key sat there for years collecting rust until a gorgeous blonde used it

to get in when she wanted to have an unannounced romantic rendezvous with her girlfriend on her birthday. That constitutes an emergency, right?

Lauren walked over to the entrance to the kitchen and looked over the dirty dishes. I would clean them before everything was said and done. It was the least I could for my Mom before I was gone.

“Look, Lauren—”

“You can’t do this to me!” she repeated, her sapphire eyes getting wet with tears. “Going off the grid, not calling back! Especially given everything that’s been going on, I can’t... damnit!” She began to cry as she leaned against the granite countertop while I watched from the couch. “I can’t lose you, Ash. I can’t.”

“You’re not.” I lied.

She wiped her eyes and sat down beside me. I put my plate on the table and wrapped my blanket around her. She was shaking. Neither of us could say anything. I knew if I did, I’d just make her even more upset. This was one of the situations where silence was the best medicine.

“Leaving you that night was the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” she said slowly as tears trickled down her face and she suppressed her sobs. “It was like tearing half of my heart out of my chest and throwing it away in the span of a minute.”

That night haunted me almost every day and night. Hearing that we were actually going to talk about it scared me more than dying. We never spoke about it before. If I had been more careful, we would still be together. I know it’s true. All I could say was I was sorry. And I was. But I didn’t know how to *say* it. So I just told her I was sorry. No heartfelt speeches, no trying to justify why I was doing blow, not even trying to win her back. I just stared at the ground and said I was sorry.

“No,” she said, collecting herself a little. “Don’t be. I’m the one that left. But I should have stayed and done... *something*. You were my *girlfriend*, Ash. But I left you there alone. I abandoned you like you were nothing. I got scared. And I’m sorry for that. I am so, so sorry.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over my shit,” I said. Now it was my turn to have tears stream down my face. All I could think to do was hold her like I used to. “It wasn’t your job to fix me. I made the mistake and now I have to live with the consequences. You were the most amazing girlfriend anyone could ever ask for. You don’t owe me a thing.”

“So what? Is this supposed to be like a last meal or something?” she asked abruptly, staring me directly in the eyes. They were more bloodshot than I’d ever seen them before. If she had stopped crying for a second since Saturday, she didn’t look like she had. “Was it a good thing I came over here then? Because you were going to hurt yourself?”

I said nothing. This was probably a mistake, but I couldn’t think up a lie on time.

“I don’t know.”

She slowly breathed in and out. “Do you want me to stay? Or would you rather I leave?”

I wanted nothing more than to kick her out and finish this. But I couldn’t do it now that she knew. I had to buy some time while I thought up a better solution. “Stay. Please.”

We curled up close on the couch and watched TV in silence. I ate my “last meal” in slow bites. I offered her something, but she declined. She said she ate a big lunch, but I knew better. The show went on and on. I could barely focus on it.

“It gets pretty good later. The show, I mean. Nothing special, though.”

“I’ve never seen it,” she said. After a few more seconds of watching in silence, she spoke up again. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

“What? The show?”

"You never answered my question. Were you going to hurt yourself?"

"Lauren, come on..."

"Don't change the subject. Okay? You pretty much said so earlier so I just want to talk about it and try to get you help."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, okay. Let's talk."

"So were you?"

"I thought about it," I admitted. "But I doubt I would have gone through with it. I'm a coward."

"You're not a coward, Ash! You're strong! You are so, so strong and you shouldn't be suffering like this alone. Do you need me to call someone? Or talk to your Mom with you?"

I scoffed. "Like she'd care."

"Ash, she loves you," Lauren swore. "She's your *Mom*. Do you know how often she talked about you to me whenever I came over? She talked about you and praised you so much, you'd think she was talking about a god or something. She loves you so much."

"But she's never home anymore!"

I don't resent her for working so much since the divorce. We needed the money... but I just wish she was around once and a while. We never really talk anymore. Just notes on the fridge saying what she made for dinner and good morning and good night texts. It was an artificial relationship that made me feel like a roommate more than a daughter.

"She was worried when you ran away," Lauren pointed out.

She did spend a full day with me after I came home. As embarrassing as it was to admit that I ran away for a couple hours, she kept me close and never let me out of her sight. But then she left again because everything went back to normal. Even one day away from the office was dangerous for us. She made an exception for me, but it was a rare one.

After I got home, I said nothing for a long time. She leaned in and held me like she had done so many times before when I was little. We held each other for the longest time and she gently rubbed my lower back while quietly weeping into my shoulder.

"Thank you for using the picture you did for the missing person poster, by the way," I said, trying to change the subject and lift her spirits. "It's one of my better ones."

She pulled back and gave me a sad smile. "You look so beautiful in every picture you take, Ashy. Never forget that."

Lauren held me close on that couch as the memory of my one good interaction with my Mom in weeks slowly drifted to the back of my mind. I could smell the vanilla. It was intoxicating. I wiped a tear from her cheek and let my hand linger. The tension in the air could be cut with a knife. We both stared longingly at each other, forcing ourselves to stay professional. At least, I did. I don't know how she was feeling. But for a second, I really thought we were going to do something.

I wouldn't have been opposed. In fact, I craved her. But I wouldn't be the one to make the first move. If I lost her again...

And then her phone rang, breaking our entrancement.

"You better get that," I said, sadly. She nodded and walked into the hallway to talk.

Taking up my post on the couch, I strained my ears to listen. I knew she was talking to Beth, but I couldn't tell what it was about. Lauren sounded kinda mad for some reason. Eventually she walked back in looking ten years older.

"Sorry. *Political stuff*," she said mockingly. She sat down next to me again.

“Sounds fascinating,” I joked. I wondered if they were having problems. They seemed okay the day before. As okay as anyone can be after a funeral, anyway. “Everything okay with you two? You seem upset.” Before she could protest like she always did when I tried to turn the conversations around to discuss her own feelings, I said, “We’ve spent all this time talking about how shitty I feel. It’s time to see how you’re doing.”

“I wish she’d just let all that stuff go for once and live a little,” Lauren complained. “Everything seems to be about student council anymore. Politics and dances and money and... I don’t know, it just gets exhausting after a while.”

“She was pretty chill when we were all hanging out yesterday,” I said.

“Yeah, but she was just trying to make you happy,” Lauren said. “She still forced Homecoming into the conversation even though it’s the last thing on my mind. Like yeah, we need to get to work on it soon, but can’t she see I’m suffocating here? Ugh!” She buried her face in her hands and shook her head.

I shifted awkwardly in my seat. There was a way to ask what I wanted to ask without it coming off as me trying to break them up. I knew it was for the best that we stay apart. This wasn’t part of some grand scheme to break them up and win her back. That ship sailed when the phone rang, if it was ever there to begin with. No matter how badly I prayed that she would take me back, I couldn’t hurt her like that again. I had to choose my words carefully.

“I know it’s none of my business, but are you two... like... happy?”

She didn’t look at me when she said, “Do you promise not to be mad?” I nodded, of course. She took a deep breath. “I know I still love her. But... I don’t know... she’s been really stressing me out lately. And I’m worried about her for... stuff. But I still love her.”

“I understand.” I really didn’t, but I was trying.

“I just hope she understands that I want us to be more than some bargain bin power couple. We’re not the Obamas or something.”

I smirked a little. “You’re a little too white to be the Obamas.”

She smiled back. “Look, I’m going to see Spencer tomorrow. Are you interested in going with me? I know he’d love to see you before he comes back on Monday.”

I still felt bad about when I went before. I went because I felt like I had to alleviate my own guilty conscience. I barely spoke when we were there. Even if I wanted to, Lauren and Kate were too busy gawking over him for me to get a word in. “I can’t,” I whispered. “Just not yet.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

“You can go if you want. I’ll be fine here. I promise.”

She nodded her head. “Okay. Beth wants to get some stuff done for Homecoming together anyway. Just... take care of yourself, Ash. And if you need someone to talk to if things get too hard, please please please call me. Okay?”

“I will.”

We hugged each other one more time before she left. I wondered if I would ever see her again after that. I wasn’t ready to die yet, but I wasn’t willing to live a second longer either. She gave me the slightest bit of hope to keep fighting, though. I guess that counts for something.

After I finished forcing myself to eat, I decided that some sun might be best to boost my serotonin levels. I changed into the smallest bikini I owned and headed for the patio chair to tan. If we didn’t have the tall fence we do, I would never go outside my house in something so revealing. But we’re lucky to have fortress-sized walls protecting us from perverts. They made me feel safe enough to lay down and tan. I didn’t jump in the pool, though. Today was a lay out under the sun and do nothing day. My biggest

fear with the divorce was losing that house. Not just because of the pool or the patio. It was my home. I made a point of savoring every second I had in it in case the worst should ever come to pass.

After a half-hour of roasting like a pig, my phone rang. I only turned it on because I worried Lauren would give me a call to make sure she didn't make a mistake in leaving the suicidal girl alone. She probably shouldn't have done that, but she doesn't need to bear all of my pain on top of her own. She isn't an expert on mental health issues. When we were together, she was the well-adjusted one compared to me.

I glanced over and saw Megan's name on the screen. I really missed her. We hadn't spoken in so long. I picked up the phone and said hi to her. I didn't want her to worry.

"Ash? How are you? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, Meg, I'm fine."

"I heard about your friend. I'm so sorry. Are you alright?"

No. "Yeah, I'm hanging in there. What's going on with you?"

"I'm okay. School's been rough. But what's up with you? Spencer said you haven't visited since he came home. Is everything okay with you two? I mean, I know you broke up and everything, but I know he still cares about you and wants to be your friend and stuff."

"Sweetie, everything is fine with us. I've just been really busy lately and a lot of stuff has been going on. I'll be over sometime before he comes back to school."

"Do you want to talk about it or anything?"

I smiled a little. A smile she'd never see. "Meg, you're too sweet. But don't worry about me. I'm fine. I swear."

"Well he said he really missed you earlier and I really hope you can see him soon," she said. "He's bored to tears right now and if he asks me to play video games with him one more time, I might scream."

"He never asked me to play video games with him."

"It's a good thing you dumped him then. What kind of boyfriend doesn't play video games with their girlfriend?"

"You're too young to date," I said, my inner Mom coming out, "but when you're older and you do find someone that's good for you, you make sure he's always willing to play video games with you. You hear me?"

She laughed. She had a sweet little laugh. She was already really pretty. I made sure to tell her that. She was extremely insecure because she had her first outbreak of acne over the summer and now she thought she was going to be ugly forever. I made sure to tell her that she was going to be a Prom Queen one day over and over until she believed it. And she would be. She was going to break so many hearts when she got older. I really did think of her as a sister and wanted to look out for her whether I was still with Spencer or not. I just hoped she wouldn't end up like me. Cynical. Bitter. So self-righteous and full of herself that she loses her soul. If I had to kill someone with my bare hands, I'd never let anyone hurt her. Especially a boy.

"I promise I'll see him today," I said. "I'll free up some time soon."

"Ah! I can't wait!" she said. "And maybe after we could go shopping? Or something? If you're not too busy."

"We'll see," I said. I didn't want to commit to more than I already had. "I'll text you soon. Sound good?"

"Yes! See you soon!"



I hung up on her and realized I had just resigned myself to another few hours of living. I figured it was for the best because I didn't want to leave Spencer wondering if he was to blame. It'd be horribly ironic considering the bulk of my lingering anxiety was spent on this lately. *Was it my fault that he crashed?* was a question that played over and over in my head like a broken record. I stayed in the sun for a few more minutes. When I finally got the nerve to stand up and go get dressed, I regretted making this promise so badly.

Sitting in my car outside Spencer's house, I wondered if I should just drive away. I'd be letting down Spencer and Megan, but it wouldn't be the worst thing I'd do to them today. What's one more failure on my part? Eventually, I gathered up the nerve to leave my car. The walk to the front door took everything out of me. My legs were shaking. I knocked and waited for someone to unlock it for me.

Megan answered the door almost immediately and flashed me the widest smile. "Ashley!" She hugged me as tight as she physically could. So tight that I couldn't breathe. For a little stringbean of a girl, she had one helluva bearhug.

"Hey, Meg," I said with a strained voice. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah, totally!" She hurried back inside and waved me in.

Spencer was sitting on the couch, eating a cup of pudding. He glanced up at me mid bite. He seemed surprised to see me. I wondered if Megan even told him she invited me over.

"Ash?"

I smiled a horrifically sad smile and gave him a little wave.

He held up the pudding cup, his mouth full of chocolate and vanilla. "Wan schum?"

"I already ate."

He shrugged, took another spoonful, and ate it. He motioned for me to sit down on the recliner near him. As I walked over, I couldn't help but glance at his leg. Thankfully, he was covered up by a blanket. If I had seen his leg, I might have thrown up on the spot. I sat down and struggled to get comfortable in the extremely comfortable chair.

"You know what Lauren told me when she saw me eating this stuff?" he asked.

"Hmm?"

"She said it goes straight to my thighs," he said, grinning.

"You do have some fat thighs," I admitted.

"It's about time I'm being recognized," he gloated. "They don't call me Thunder Thighs Barnett for nothing. It takes a lot to maintain this figure." I smiled a little. "You been tanning? You look darker."

"A little, yeah. With Homecoming in a few weeks, I wanted to look nice."

"Damn, is it really that soon? The year seems like it's flying by." He wasn't wrong. "I'm glad you came to visit."

"I'm sorry I only went to the hospital that one time," I said. "I hate hospitals. My grandmother..."

"Ah," Spencer said. Then he realized that answer came off weird. "I mean, yeah, no, it's totally fine. I really don't mind. I didn't want you to have to drive for two hours each way just to see my dumb face."

"I still feel bad."

He smiled and rolled his eyes. "I appreciate it. But trust me, it's totally okay. You're here now, right?" He looked me over and seemingly read my mind. But given how shitty I looked, I don't think it was hard to see something was wrong. "You doing alright?"

I was sick of people asking me that. "Yeah, I'm good. Why?"

"I'm just saying, if you need to go, it's okay," Spencer replied.

“Spence, I’m fine. Really. I waited this long to come see you again. I think I can make it another hour or so before I need to get home.”

He continued eating his pudding, then smiled. “Mmm! Wanna see my new cane?”

He reached over the side of the couch and struggled to reach it. When he grabbed it, he held it up in the light for me to see. It’s a simple wooden cane with a beautiful metal handle. I think the wood was maple, but I could be wrong. It kinda looked like my coffee table. Regardless, it looked really impressive.

“Pretty cool, right!” Spencer gawked at it like it was the first time. “Don’t answer, I know it’s awesome. Megan saw it at a garage sale her and her friends went to a couple days ago and she got it for me. Beats the hell out of the crutches, even if it kinda sucks while my leg is still messed up. But just imagine how cool I’m gonna look with this thing when I can use it.”

“Well, don’t you look like a Victorian aristocrat,” I said.

“Sarcasm aside, you can bet I’ll be using this bad boy when I need to get up a flight of stairs at school.” He waved it around a little and continued to fawn over it. “The guys are gonna be so jealous when I get to twirl this around like I’m Willy Won—”

“Are you mad at me?” I asked before I could stop myself, killing the mood.

Spencer looked at me, confused. “Huh?”

“Like... fuck, do you blame me? For that?” I pointed at the outline of the cast underneath the blanket.

He glanced down to see what I was pointing at. When he connected the dots, he frowned. “Ash, come on. It was an accident. It’s nobody’s fault.”

“I mean, we were both having a really shitty day and you just drove off and...”

He lowered his voice so Megan couldn’t possibly hear him. “I didn’t *mean* to hit the tree, Ash. Come on. It’s *me* we’re talking about. I don’t want to hurt myself.”

“I never meant... I just want to be sure you’re okay. Especially after what happened to Michelle...”

“I know. Thank you. And I’m sorry about Michelle. She was really cool.”

She was. She was so much better than me. And now she’s gone.

“It’s okay.”

“Why are you so hung up on my car crash anyway?”

The words came spilling out before I could stop myself. I was desperate for someone to care. “Because I blame myself and I feel like shit every second of the day for everything that happened with you and Lauren and Michelle and I just want this to stop because I can’t take it anymore!” I regretted it as soon as I said it. But at the same time, I’m glad I did. It was eating away at me like a parasite. “It’s not worth it. It’s not.”

“What’s not worth it?” he asked.

“Everything.”

“Ash, talk to me.”

It was happening again. I was pushing him away. Someone I cared about was being infected with my bullshit because I couldn’t stop myself from dumping my problems on them. He couldn’t help me. He shouldn’t have to put up with my shit. I dragged him into this, kicking and screaming, and made him worry about me for nothing. I’m a cancer. A weight that drags people I care about down with me. He was judging me for everything I just said. I was a loser that deserved to die. I couldn’t stay there anymore. I had to get out.

“This was a mistake.” I stood and hurried to the front door.

“Ash, stop!” Spencer called out. “Please don’t go. Just sit and talk to me.”

“What else is there to say?”

I just hoped Megan wouldn’t be too upset when she heard I was gone.

## **THE ASSEMBLY**

## Beth

Given recent developments, it was imperative that I put some of the ideas I had swirling around in my mind to fruition. I could not sit idly by while my life passed me by anymore. We were at the top of the mountain and I would be goddamned if I was going to allow one tiny little miscue on my part to cast us back down.

Ashley skipped an extra day of school. Given the circumstances, I doubt the administration would punish her for it. This gave me plenty of time to prepare and give her the greatest Homecoming present anyone could ever receive. In the meantime, I would need to call in some favors and set people in the direction I required. And if I had some spare time, I intended to meet with this Hannah Waters girl and see if she was of any use to me. I suspected she was nothing more than one of Victoria's cronies so my chances of influencing her were slim to none.

First and foremost, I needed to convince the rest of Student Council to throw an assembly.

"So I know everyone is still hurting," I began, all eyes on me, "but I think we can do something with this to help the school. It's not healthy to bottle these things up. If we are going to feel better and get some sense of... I guess you could say closure? If we're going to get any sense of closure, we need to talk about it and try to come together and move on, for lack of a better term, and I feel terrible for even saying it like that."

Half of Student Council was missing. The only ones present were myself, Lauren, Katherine, Victoria, Jasmine, Raymond, Tyler, Natasha, and Hannah the new girl. Ashley was out for obvious reasons; Tom was with Casey, who herself was with Heather because they were close friends with Michelle and wanted to mourn; and the rest neglected to bother to show up for one reason or another. I had all the support I needed, however.

"She's right," Victoria said quietly.

Jasmine reached over and held Victoria's hand. "What'd you have in mind?" she asked.

Lauren looked at me and I gave her a nod, signaling it was her time to speak. We had planned this out ahead of time. It wasn't the first time this had been done when Arlington lost one of our own. The difference was everyone loved Michelle in life, rather than feigning interest in Grace's death and using it as an excuse to bury Kara for all the bullshit she put everyone through.

She slowly stood up and addressed her peers. "I talked with Beth and Kate and we all think we should hold an assembly—"

Raymond rolled his eyes and Tyler groaned a little.

"I'm sorry, is there a problem?" I snapped. "Is there something funny about a girl dying? Did you have any better ideas?"

Raymond and Tyler jumped. Normally an outburst like this would have everyone in the room looking at me like I was crazy. This was an exception, much like when I went after Tyler before for being a sexist pig. I don't care if they didn't know her. They didn't have the right to be total pieces of shit. Michelle was a good person and she accepted me into her circle of friends despite being a total outcast. She didn't deserve to die.

Victoria and Jasmine looked like they wanted to snap their necks. Lauren was fuming. Even Katherine sounded furious when she spoke.

"And not just her," Katherine said, more angry than I'd ever seen her before. "Spencer could have been killed a few weeks ago, too. This wouldn't just be for Michelle. It'd be all about safe driving and not driving drunk and stuff like that. We don't want to lose someone else."

I settled down and reminded myself that I was the voice of reason in the room. I could hate those two pricks later.

It was admirable how much she desired Spencer, even if she never had a chance with him. She tried so hard to pretend she held no physical attraction to anyone around here and yet she just turned a conversation about the premature death of a well-liked girl into a way to show her devotion to her little boy toy. I wondered if he would ever give her the time of day.

When neither Raymond nor Tyler spoke up again in their defense, I continued on.

“We figured the rest of this week should be to recover from the loss and by Friday, we’ll be ready to address the situation.”

“I’m pissed O’Reilly isn’t doing something already,” Victoria muttered. “Giving us a day off for the funeral and pretending it never happened at all is such bullshit.” Jasmine nodded in approval.

“We believe he would go for this,” I assured her. “If you’re for it, we had a few ideas we wanted to run by you.”

The rest of the meeting was spent planning things out. Lauren and I would meet with O’Reilly before we left and tell him what we wanted to do. On Friday, we would meet in the gym and hold a little memorial service that would involve her friends and peers saying some words on her behalf. Some random people in the halls had spoken about a walk around the neighborhood this weekend, but I knew that would never materialize.

It was at this assembly that I would make my move. I knew it had to be Friday.

## Lauren

After school was over, I dropped Beth off at her house and drove over to Spencer's to give him his homework. He had been texting me all day to try and get my mind off of Michelle dying. It did help a lot. I needed the distraction.

Beth had been really supportive, too. Even though they didn't know each other as well as I would have liked, they got on pretty well. That's partially my fault because I was really slow to introduce them to each other. I was still pretty shook up over what happened with Ashley and I was worried that something would happen and tear my group of friends apart again.

Was I still worried about Damien? Yes, absolutely. But I couldn't be mad at her. She did everything a girlfriend could ever possibly do to make me feel better. Beth was by my side all weekend to make sure I was alright. I was over being angry with her. It was all just some meaningless pettiness on my part. I loved her so much.

When I got to Spencer's house, I met Megan for the first time when she answered the door. I think I'd seen her at the party for a moment, but I was so drunk that I can't even remember her.

She looked at me quizzically and asked, "Who are you?"

"Lauren," I said smiling. "Are you Megan? It's good to meet you."

She stared at me for a few seconds. "Are you Spencer's new girlfriend?" The way she asked, she almost sounded angry at the thought of this being true.

I didn't have a sister so I didn't have a whole lot of experience talking to thirteen year olds. I'm only three years older than her, but we might as well be two generations apart. That's why I will never be able to trust people who say people in their 20's dating teenagers isn't fucked up. I have a thousand times more life experience than this girl and she's one year out from high school. A college Sophomore and a high school Junior? Forget about it.

"What?" I laughed a little. "No, of course not. We're friends."

It was weird to say that. Even though it was never going to happen, the thought of us dating made my stomach knot up a little. I had hoped that patching things up with Beth and remembering how much I loved her would kill this dumb crush, but it lingered like a scab days after the cut had finally stopped bleeding. Did that make me a bad person?

Megan, still indifferent to my existence, shrugged and let me inside.

Spencer sat with me and talked about Michelle and the funeral for almost an hour before I bothered to give him his homework that was due. But we only talked about class for a couple minutes before the conversation turned back to the funeral. He wanted to be there, but his leg was still recovering and he needed rest. I'm not sure how well he really knew Michelle, besides all of us hanging out as a group, but I know he did feel terrible that she died.

"Frank has been taking it pretty hard," he admitted.

She was closer with Frank than Spencer. I still had to check in on him. "Really?"

"I think he was going to ask her to Homecoming again. Stop being so off and on and actually be official, you know?"

"God, I still can't believe she's gone." Even after days and days of sobbing like a baby, I started to cry again. I thought I had been drained of every single tear I could ever cry, but somehow I managed to shed a few tears in the middle of Spencer's living room.

Spencer hobbled over to sit beside me and let me cry into his shoulder. Even though I knew I shouldn't, it felt so good to have someone holding me. I felt like putty in his arms, dissolving like water. I'm such a fucking idiot.

I quickly stood back up, taking care to not brush Spencer's bad shoulder or wrist. "I should uh... hey, I'm sorry, but I should get going. Beth wants to get dinner with me later."

He looked as disappointed as I felt. "Oh. Yeah. Sure. See you soon?"

"Absolutely."

I wouldn't see him again until he came back to school on Monday.



## Beth

There are three things in my life that I held more dear than anything in the entire world.

First was Lauren. This should come as no surprise to anyone. I would have killed for her. She was my entire being. Without her, I was nothing. Treading water alone. It was that simple.

Second is the bass I got as a birthday present from Grace. I went over to her house to celebrate and she let me have one of her many bass guitars she owned. She said her father was a music producer and had access to a number of instruments. She loved to play for me when we were alone. Guitar, bass, drums, she was a one-woman band. I know for a fact she could have become a professional musician if she had lived. She could have been the frontwoman of her own band and I would have been her groupie. We talked about that more than once.

Even though I had absolutely no experience playing anything in my life, she showed me some easy bass solos online and I was hooked. It was really just a vain attempt to impress her. There's a joke about me being terrible with my hands somewhere in there. She did her best to teach me. The blisters were the worst part.

Believe it or not, I do have a life and do occasionally enjoy myself. It has admittedly been a long time since I could sit back and love myself and my life, but it is possible.

During the evenings after school was over, we spent at her place trying to numb the pain of being the most hated girls at Arlington City High for the crime of existing in the same space as people like Kara Alderman, Kylie Washington, and Ashley Williams. She would play for me and I would try and fail for her. She showed me the likes of John Entwistle, John Paul Jones, and Lemmy and we would jam out to rock and grunge and metal for hours on end.

She even showed me the music she was writing. Original songs. I look at a music sheet and see a bunch of squiggly lines that might as well be Egyptian hieroglyphs, but she saw magic. She saw her entire reason for living. She had pages and pages and pages of music that she was working on. All kinds of songs, and some damn good ones, too. She said her biggest inspiration was Cliff Burton and she would have sold her soul to meet the guy.

"The guy was an artist," she said one day while tuning her pearl white guitar. "He was Mozart with a wah wah pedal."

"Yeah, totally, totally. What's a wah wah pedal?"

We started to write a song together in late April through early May. Our magnum opus. It was going to be this ten minute long ballad about our love persevering through the darkest times and finding reasons to keep going despite all of the shit we endured at school. It would be an inspiration for people like us in every high school in the world. We'd be the voice of a generation of bullied kids everywhere.

Did we dream too much and pretend we were the second coming of Beethoven? Yes, and we couldn't have given a shit. We were going to become artists together. The song was going to be incredible and it would be the masterpiece that launched her career. She would become a rock star at the head of her own band before becoming a producer like her Dad.

We never even gave our song a name. She died two weeks later. I never touched the song again.

The last, but certainly not least, thing held most dear in my life was my personal copy of the school's Master Key.

It was all so simple. Buying a wrench so I had an excuse to go into the boiler room, which also served as the maintenance guy's office, so I could "return it" after I found it laying around in the gym. It was an unnecessary measure, as it turns out, because the handyman was off doing work someplace else at

that time. He should really learn to lock his doors. It was no trouble at all just walking over to his desk and taking the second copy of the Master Key from his little set of hooks that held every key imaginable. I knew exactly which one I was looking for and took it with me. Finding a hardware store to get a copy made was no issue either. Poor little Caroline Davis just moved into her Dad's house for college and needed a second key to her new place. No one suspected a thing.

What I figured would be far more difficult was getting into the school. They would have the place locked up tight and the alarms would be ready to alert the police to an intruder. Maybe even a security officer patrolling the grounds.

As easy as it would be to just skip this part of my master plan, I needed to get into the front office and I could not access those files during the day. Front Office Lady Rose is far too nosey and would sniff me out in an instant, the bitch. I spent far too long trying to figure out the best way to evade police involvement, but I was left with little choice besides a quick in-and-out raid.

I had it down to the letter. Every detail was planned out so I was down to the strictest clock management in history. Coach Mullens himself would be proud of my attention to discipline. One false move meant I could be caught. There was no margin for error.

My master plan had multiple parts that needed to be followed in order if this was to work out the way I intended. Countless hours had been spent making sure this was going the way I planned it. It was admittedly rather simplistic in design and required few moving parts, but I find the more simple plans to be the best plans.

### **Beth's Master Plan**

STEP I: GET A NEW PHONE PLAN

STEP II: CHECK THE PHONE BOOK

STEP III: BRINGING IN THE SHEEP

STEP IV: RETURN SOME VIDEO TAPES

Admittedly not the most original names for the steps involved, but they were coded just well enough that anyone who found my little black book would not realize what I was planning. Not that I anticipated anyone would go crawling through my underwear drawer like some kind of perverted goblin, but the chance was always there. Lauren did like to see if I bought anything new to try on for her every now and then. She might be a perverted goblin, but she was my perverted goblin.

I digress.

I approached the school at midnight the same day I proposed the assembly. This gave me a margin of error that would allow me to return if my initial plan failed for some reason. Should something go wrong, I could delay the date of the assembly if we needed to. If I needed to raid the main office during the day because I managed to get myself chased off by the police, so be it.

Clad in a skin-tight black outfit that was extremely flattering for my figure, I approached the school in the dead of night. My hair was tied in a bun and hidden beneath a black ski mask so no one could identify me on a camera. I took every back alley I could find so as to not be recognized by any onlookers.

When I reached the school, I approached from the football field. After my dealing with Elliot Rodger Jr. and the rest of the Trench Coat Mafia, I realized this route into the school had far fewer cameras than the parking lot, allowing me to approach from the shadows and evade detection (or at the very least not be seen from the main road where the cops were more likely to be sulking around.) I knew I had to have been seen on at least one camera, but it made no difference. I would deal with the security footage soon enough.

After evading the camera, I made it to the back door of the school near the equipment room and football team's locker room. It took me a couple tries to undo the lock. They really needed to get it fixed. Or change it so one key can't unlock every single door in the school. I knew time was of the essence. As soon as the door unlocked and I could swing it open, I sprinted in the direction of the main office. I made a pit stop at the maintenance room to grab the extra set of keys that gave me access to the filing cabinets in the front office.

Upon arrival, I was out of breath and sucking down air from behind my black mask. Despite being in relatively good shape, I really could have done with a workout every once in a while. I had to stop to unlock the front office door. I could feel the camera watching me as I unlocked the door. My smile grew when I felt the lock click and I rushed inside.

The security office was beside O'Reilly's so I had no issues there. A dozen computer screens were mounted on the wall with a desktop beneath them. I had learned how to change the DVD the security footage was saved to from Grace. She knew some guy who once did it to get out of being caught for smoking up in the weight room. Ejecting the disk was just too easy. Snapping the little bastard in half and stuffing the pieces in my sweatshirt was even easier.

The filing cabinets were the biggest struggle. I was living on borrowed time and I did not know which one of the keys opened the drawers so I had to go through every individual key to find the right one. I cursed every single time I used the wrong one. When I finally got them open, I pulled out the files inside and began to read the contents with the flashlight of my phone turned very low. The light reflecting off of the white papers blinded me. I persevered.

I had exactly what I needed. I took a notepad from Rose's desk and began transcribing every little detail inside. Whatever I deemed important went on those pages. My wrist was on fire from writing so fast, but time was of the essence.

Satisfied with how much I got done in so little time and unable to write anything more without fear of my hand falling off, I stuffed the notepad inside the pocket. I winced when I felt something sharp graze my hand. The DVD cut through my Latex glove and slit my palm open. Blood trickled down onto the table. I quickly wiped it away with a tissue and hurried out, my hand buried in my jean pocket so I could try to not bleed all over the place and expose my identity to the world. Too many cop shows taught me how skilled police are at uncovering mysteries like this.

Being the kind person I am, I even locked the doors behind me as I ran away. No sense in leaving them open for anyone to sneak inside the main office, or God forbid the school.

Sitting back in my bed at home with some bandages around my hand, I allowed myself to imagine the world that was coming. Everything was going to change, for better or worse. I slept very little that night. Being a poor sleeper, this was nothing new. When I awoke and checked the TV, I learned that there was a break-in at Arlington City High and police were investigating. They considered solving the case a matter of the utmost importance.

Despite being cool as a cucumber and knowing I did everything possible to avoid detection, I knew there were a number of factors I had no control over that could give me away. The cameras that obviously saw me breaking in may have been connected to a second tape or DVD that I did not break. I may have left fingerprints when I had to remove the bloody glove, I could have brushed something by accident. Not to mention the issue of my bleeding on the table left a major hole in my attempts at discretion. Even though I cleaned up after myself, it was dark so I could have missed something. An ever-growing pit began to engulf my stomach. Dread filled my mind. I felt beads of sweat trickle down the length of my spine. I feared going into school that day. It was a dirty little secret only I knew that could never get out.

Holding onto this secret would not be a problem for very long. Friday was shaping up to change the world and I would never have to worry about my troubles ever again.

### **Beth's Master Plan**

~~STEP I: GET A NEW PHONE PLAN~~

~~STEP II: CHECK THE PHONE BOOK~~

STEP III: BRINGING IN THE SHEEP

STEP IV: RETURN SOME VIDEO TAPES

## Kate

Everyone was in an awful mood for the whole week. I wished I could feel as bad as they did. I barely knew Michelle so it didn't hit me as hard as it did everyone around me, but I still felt bad. I guess it was some kind of survivor's guilt. I wished I could have endured some of the pain she had gone through instead. As easy for me to say as it may be since I don't have to personally go through it, I'd rather endure it so someone else could live. I felt the same way when my grandpa got his cancer diagnosis. I would have done anything to take some of the pain away. I don't know if this makes me sound good or bad, but it's how I felt then and still do now.

In the end, I just hope she didn't suffer.

What really hurt was seeing how sad everyone else was. My new friends, some of whom had known her since kindergarten, were devastated. Ashley was heartbroken again and needed time away from school and ever since she quit the squad, Casey and Heather were stuck in limbo without her to guide them. Poor Lauren had lost the one person who stuck by her after she and Ashley had broken up. She and Beth seemed to have made up in the meantime, though. Loss does bring people together.

Spencer was due to come back on Monday and I was legitimately scared for how he would be perceived by everyone. I heard people whispering about him at lunch. Even after everything that was going on, the feud between him and Brad was still hot gossip. His upcoming return sparked a renewed interest. Brad was still wandering the halls and people gave him sideways glances every chance they got. He was still on the football team, for some inexplicable reason, and continued to be the best player on defense. I heard him bragging to the guys about Oklahoma sending a scout to watch him this coming Friday. Thinking about it well after the fact, I think I know why he was allowed to keep playing...

It sickened me to think someone like that could get into a major school for free just because he can hit people really hard while wearing a helmet. Even if half the team believed he tried to rape Ashley, he was still a co-captain and they were forced to respect him.

## Tracy

Things were quiet around school after Michelle died. Like all the happiness in the world died.

Those couple days of limbo where everyone was grieving were hard. We got a day off of school to grieve, but we had to come back and it was rough. It reminded me a lot about what happened in May the year before. The difference between Michelle and Grace was obvious, though: Michelle was popular. People loved her. They didn't shove her into lockers or carve slurs into her car door with their keys or vice versa.

The day was both the slowest and fastest I'd ever seen. We all just wanted to go home and distract ourselves so the day dragged on, but nobody paid any attention in classes. It was 1:45 before we knew it.

It was time to hold Michelle's memorial.

I didn't know her well. From our brief talks, I found that she was one of the kindest people in the whole school and never tried to bring anyone down. We talked a few times because of my being on Student Council and having worked with Ashley a lot. She never had a bad thing to say to me about anything and I respected her a lot for that. I wished I could have gotten to know her better.

Normally an assembly in the gym or the auditorium involves everyone screwing around and talking for as long as they can to avoid the actual ceremony from taking place. It was a game to see how far they could make it to the end of the day without actually doing anything so we could all just go home. The "Student vs. Faculty Games" they do every year always draws taunts and jeers and sarcasm from everyone who bothers to show up. Hell, most of the Seniors just skip it anyway and no one goes looking for them.

But that day was different and everyone that wasn't sick or mourning in private showed up. There wasn't a dry eye in the house when people began to sit down.

In the middle of the gym was a tripod holding up a big wreath with Michelle's picture. It was the only decoration there, but it got its point across. The lights were turned off and we all sat in silence. Sunlight seeped in from the large windows that surrounded the gym, but it was an overcast day so the atmosphere outside was as dull and gloomy as it was inside the school.

I watched Kate lead Casey and Heather toward their seats in the middle of the gym. Student Council had to sit at half-court beside the wreath because they were presenting the event. I'd hate to be at the center of all of this, even if I wasn't speaking. I felt really bad for Kate. In more ways than one.

Lauren's eyes were bright red and she had her face half-buried in her elbow. She made a walk of shame behind the rest of Student Council to take her seat. I was surprised to see Beth wasn't beside her. I would have thought she would be holding her hand and trying to soothe her during this. I know I'd seen her around earlier in the day. Not that I wanted to see her, but I know Lauren and Michelle were close. I wondered if Michelle ever found out about Lauren and Beth being a couple.

We sat in agonizing silence for about ten minutes after the last of us entered the gym and took our seats. The soft echoes of crying would flare up and go silent only to be replaced by someone else's tears from the other side of the room. The members of Student Council were quietly talking amongst themselves, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. They seemed very stressed out.



## Lauren

My heart was beating faster and faster. I couldn't bring myself to stand up and speak. Every time I looked up and scanned the audience, I saw another person crying. It only made me feel worse. The worse I felt, the less I wanted to start talking. The empty seat beside me was like a black hole in the room that was desperate to be filled.

Instead of starting things off, I turned to Kate and whispered, "Where's Beth? She said she'd be here by now."

Kate shrugged her shoulders. "Something might have come up before she got here? I haven't seen her since lunch."

Tom leaned in from a few seats over. "Can we please get this over with?"

He looked like he was barely holding it together. Even though he was a late addition to the group, they hit it off right away. I was starting to think this whole thing was a mistake and I dragged everyone out to cry in public. It wasn't fair to everyone.

"We have to do something," Jasmine said. "With or without her."

"She said to start at exactly 2:15," Victoria reminded us. She showed me her phone and it said 2:14.

Beth said in our Student Council Leadership group chat that we should keep things short so no one is forced to stay later than they have to. I agreed without question. I wanted to go cry again before anyone saw me.

"She might not be here, but we have to do this," Kate insisted. "Lauren?"

I nodded and took one last second to prepare myself. I was glad Kate was taking control of the situation. I wish I had the strength to be the one in charge, considering I am the President and all, but I was just so worn out by that point that I didn't have any authority left in me. This was supposed to be an event that Beth and I would run together. I was really upset that she just ditched me when I needed her most.

*It's not about you and your love life, you selfish bitch. It's about Michelle.*

"Okay. Let's do this."

## Beth

Everyone in the building was in the gym. I think even the maintenance guy showed up. If he did, I figured I should drop by and thank him for his part in all of this. He really did me a solid by leaving his door unlocked all the time.

Despite the break-in, there was little to no extra security around the building. They had a cop walk up and down the halls to make us feel “safer” in the morning as we were coming into school and he was gone before second period ended. This left me alone with everything I needed to succeed. Their negligence was my gain.

There are two computer labs in the school’s main building: the main lab that connected to the server room and the smaller one by the library on the second floor. I went to the larger of the two because it offered multiple avenues of escape should I be caught and more computers to work with. This, combined with the added security of this computer lab being on the other side of the school from the gym, made it the perfect place to fort up and get to work.

I turned on ten computers and logged all of them into the Administrator account. You would think the Computer teacher would keep his username and password anywhere else than on a piece of paper on the inside of his desk, but you would be wrong. I went into Incognito Mode and logged into the anonymous burner email account I created the night prior. I was running back and forth to each terminal, loading up the email account and downloading the texting software I had sent the link to when I made the account. Each computer now had the software I needed so the real work could begin.

All that was left was to send the pictures to the email account and download them to each computer individually. My heart raced as I waited for them to actually download. I knew I could be caught at any moment. Every second of waiting was agonizing. When they downloaded and the email was sent, it was just a matter of loading them up.

## Lauren

I stood at the microphone with the wreath beside me and took a deep breath. This was my moment to make people remember the life of an amazing girl and I wasn't going to waste it. I didn't have the nerve to speak at her funeral, but I wasn't missing my chance now. So I exhaled all the pain in my body, hardened my heart, and stepped forward.

"Hi. Everyone. Recently we had a tragedy occur to two good people who go to this school. Spencer Barnett was involved in a bad car accident, but thankfully he is expected to make a full recovery and return on Monday. And Michelle..."

I couldn't bring myself to finish. I let my sad little hiccup and suppression of tears speak for me. I kept my eyes lowered so I couldn't see anyone looking at me. I once heard about professional wrestlers intentionally growing out their hair so they could plan out their matches with the hair covering their mouths as they whispered to each other. I randomly remembered that the night before the assembly and I made sure to keep my hair down that day so I could use my bangs to cover my face if anything happened and I began to cry. I looked like a mess, but it beats seeing people watch me cry.

"She was a good person. An amazing person. She was one of my closest friends in the world. And... sorry, and we're here today to talk about what happened to her. We wanted to hold this assembly to talk about why she's gone. Drunk driving accidents take the lives of over ten thousand people every year and... it's..." My sadness turned to anger, my grief turned to rage. "It's *bullshit*," I spat.

I had to submit a copy of the speech to Mr. Hardy before we were given the okay and swearing wasn't allowed at school events, but they didn't try to stop me after I did. I just lost my best friend. Fucking expel me.

"We live in a world where you can get an Uber or Lyft with the click of a button and we still lose more people to drunk driving deaths every year than there are students in this school. This shouldn't fucking happen!"

I turned my head and cleared my throat. It gave me a good view of where the teachers were sitting. Despite dropping an F-Bomb, they still sat down and let me speak. I felt a single tear roll down my cheek. I needed Beth so badly. I felt so alone up there all by myself.

"I loved her so much. She was there for me when I needed her most and I'll never forget that."

That was when every single person heard a single word that shattered the mood of everyone in the room. No one expected it or saw it coming. And how could they? Why would anyone say this at a school's memorial for someone who died that was universally beloved by everyone around her?

"DYKE!"

It wasn't necessary. No one needed to hear it. No one wanted to hear it. It was nothing but a hateful, disgusting comment by someone who will die alone that just wanted to entertain themselves and their equally-terrible friends. A few people did laugh, of course, but they were ostracized as badly as the guy who just had to open his mouth.

Everyone's heads turned toward the origin of the slur. There was no avoiding it, it was loud as a gunshot. I was taken back to the end of my Sophomore year. After Grace died, everyone stared at Kara. They knew what she did and they wouldn't let her forget it. They certainly weren't going to let this guy go away without facing punishment. How did that guy imagine he would get away with saying it? O'Reilly rushed over and escorted him out of the gym faster than you could blink. He was a douchebag, but damn if he didn't care enough to shut shit down in an instant if you pissed him off.

Frank wanted to kill the guy. It took three guys to hold him back from jumping out of the bleachers and strangling him. We all knew he and Michelle loved each other, even if they never came right out and said it. They kept their relationship very hush hush. We weren't fooled. After the teachers convinced him to calm down, he sat far far away from the guy. His scowl never faded, though.

"You're really cute, you know that?" I found myself saying to him as he was being taken away. "And all of you laughing, you must think that's really funny, too, huh? How would you feel if that was your sister he was talking about? Just because I said I loved someone doesn't mean I wanted to fuck them."

All the sadness in my body turned to indescribable rage. I was fueled by hate. Nothing could stop me from tearing those bastards apart now. I just dared them to laugh again.

"So go on, tell me. What would happen if someone called your sister that? Or what if your brother was getting the shit kicked out of him in an alley for being a prissy little fag or for being a cripple or something else he can't control? How fucking gross can you be to turn this into such a disgusting joke?"

For a few minutes, I was allowed to be angry and I enjoyed every bit of it like manna from Heaven. No one tried to stop me. I was running on hatred for the world for taking Michelle. This idiot was the perfect punching bag and I never got to see his face. He was out of the gym before I could even open my mouth.

## Beth

The worst trope in any high school media is when the bully sends a text to every single person in the school and everyone knows what was sent before the scene changes. Like how everyone looks up at exactly the right time and the good guy gets so confused as the extras' smiles turn to sneers. The moment when the main character knows they really fucked up or are about to get fucked up.

When you really think about it, it just makes no logical sense. How can one person possibly have everyone's phone number at once? How could everyone be able to see it when they are spread across the school? How does the bad guy not get caught sending one text to a hundred people at the same time. How do you manage to embarrass a single person in an instant with everyone so far apart and so many variables?

I spent many sleepless nights planning these different variables out to figure out how to overcome them. There is a reason I rarely get a good night's sleep. There is too much to do and so little time on this Earth to do them. I needed to have these issues mapped out ahead of time so they would not become an issue when zero hour came.

Sleep is for the weak. I can sleep when I am dead.

Some of the issues I came up with as time went on include the following:

1. How do I acquire the phone numbers of everyone in the school?

Well this one is simple. I am dating the most popular girl in school and go to parties with her and her friends. This allowed me to gain the numbers of many, many people I would otherwise never speak to. It's crazy how many people will line up to get your number just because they see you hang out with a popular person. Trying to leech some of that energy from you, I guess.

Other people just leave their phones lying around, especially at parties or in the locker room. Simply tapping the spots where I see fingerprints and getting lucky with my limited number of guesses unlocks the phone and gives me access to all of their contacts. If this does not work for whatever reason such as getting the number wrong, I just put the phone back before it gets locked out. No one will ever notice that someone took a few screenshots, texted them to Bethany Hill's phone, and deleted the pictures and texts after they were sent.

What sixteen year old checks their phone records? No one is ever the wiser.

Gaining Damien's trust and access to his friends' contact lists was an added bonus. He had access to the losers and the bottom 99% that Lauren and her friends never knew existed or would be caught dead interacting with. Add them together and I have more than enough people to go around. If the whole Victoria incident taught me anything, it's how even the most pathetic dweebs will share anything and everything if it involves a popular kid looking even worse off than them.

2. How do I acquire the phone numbers of parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, guardians, etc.

Well now this one was more difficult.

I only have so many phones available to me. If the only parents who got the pictures were also the parents of the only kids who got the pictures as well, it would narrow down who sent the messages pretty easily. Thankfully for me, every student has a full list of emergency contacts, doctors, guardians, and the like just sitting in the front office. God forbid someone suffer a seizure or break a bone and need to call their parents. I cut out the middleman of needing to break into every single phone owned by every single student in the school by simply breaking into school and getting all the numbers myself.

Was it the most risky and reckless part of the plan? Yes, absolutely. Totally worth it, though. However, this leads into my next conundrum...

3. How do I ruin his reputation?

This was simple. Make sure everyone knows what happened with firsthand accounts and evidence that is impossible to deny. I had more than enough to go around. The only downside is he didn't actually touch her before he was caught in the act by Lauren. If he had, I would have him getting tossed around like a dog toy in prison for what he did.

Now that every student at Arlington City High had easy access to the pictures, they would know once and for all that the roided up monster in their midst was as evil as Spencer claimed. The fight would be seen as justified and Brad would lose any chance of getting a Division-1 Scholarship. Hell, I'd be shocked if one of those Junior Colleges gave him a chance, regardless of his parents' wealth.

With parents getting the pictures, they would flock to the school to defend the poor girl who was stripped naked by the son of someone who works for the Mayor. The guy has more connections than anyone I've ever met because of that rich bastard. Turn the parents against him, though, and you start a grease fire among the PTA. His mommy wouldn't be able to talk his way out of this one. The PTA would demand action and Brad would be suspended pending investigation, change schools, or continue to attend ACH and be ostracized by everyone around him. No matter what he did, he would have nowhere to hide once those pictures got onto the Internet.

Thank God he was too stupid to check the bathroom before he attempted rape.

4. How do I distribute all of the numbers?

There are a number of free texting apps and softwares out there. They're the same ones terrorists use to coordinate attacks. Very useful stuff. I am not stupid enough to send these numbers from my own phone or even one of the burners. I do not know if the police could track the number of the burner back to the buyer, Damien and/or Tracy, and considering they would be more than happy to sell me out to save their own skin, it was a risk I refused to take.

There is no need to slit their throats to save my own skin when I can make things so much simpler by loading up the same software on a dozen computers, load up multiple fake numbers, and send the pictures from a dozen different sources. It was quite annoying to enter in a list of different numbers on each computer and the risk of being caught by a teacher or student going into the room while I am working had me running around like a crystal meth addict, but it was a price to pay for security.

5. What do I have to gain from all of this?

I did not have altruistic intentions from this plan. Not really. The most simple of answers was gaining Ashley Williams' trust and Brad gone. I did not need Brad Kendrick. But I could use Ashley Williams in a heartbeat.

The risk of upsetting Lauren was there, but I could fake pretty much anything to gain her trust back. My phone sadly died and I had to be rushed off to a dentist appointment before I could find her and deliver the unfortunate news of my missing the assembly. She loved me, she would understand.

The clock struck 2:18. I was a bit off schedule with entering the phone numbers into the computers, but it made no difference. I had no idea what was going on upstairs, but I knew I was wasting time just standing around with my thumb up my own ass. Lauren was serenading the crowd with her

lovely voice and sad songs while I was playing the loyal friend who looked out for her and her ex-girlfriend who had a gun to her cheek a couple days ago.

Unlike other people, I knew what was best for Lauren. And for me, by extension. Whether she wanted this or not, it had to happen if things were to improve around here. Especially for her. I wasn't going to let her go like I did Grace.

I gave the computers a once-over to make sure everything was ready. I had rehearsed this plan at my home with my laptop and the family desktop a hundred times over to be absolutely sure this would work. Adjusting for the time difference of ten computers versus two on opposite sides of the room, I believed I had less than one minute to click Send on each computer before rushing to the next one. I would have exactly one minute before I had to double back and begin uninstalling every form of software and logging out of the computers. Within three minutes, I would need to be out of the room before the hornet nest was sufficiently stirred.

The clock hit 2:20 and I knew it was time. I took a deep breath before I reached for the first computer. I knew she would understand.

## Lauren

No one tried to stop me. I was white fucking hot. Any of the sadness left in me I had turned into pure anger, pure rage. I needed someone to be mad at because of how cruel the world was. If this guy didn't open his mouth, I would have never exploded like this. I'd still be the pretty girl who was always positive and never raised her voice and was sweet and quiet and everyone loved because she never spoke out. A hot, silent husk. Just the way women were meant to be.

But I decided to open my big fucking mouth and now it was too late to stop. Ask me if I cared. You might not like the answer. I was surprised that nobody rushed to stop me as soon as I started swearing or began throwing slurs back at him. The same ones I read online every day and made me retreat further and further back into the closet for fear of being called one to my face.

Now that I had, I wasn't afraid anymore. That seal had been broken and I had nothing left to lose.

The reason no one ran up to stop me was probably because O'Reilly was busy disciplining the guy in the hallway and wasn't there to give the order for me to stop. None of the teachers made an effort to stop me either. Hell, I think some of them were impressed I had this in me. I know for a fact I saw Mr. Hardy smile once.

"All I wanted to do was get us together and remember the sweetest girl that ever went to this school and try to keep someone from being killed in the future and this is how we remember her? *Bullshit!*"

Kate finally stood up and put a hand on my shoulder. I shrugged her off and kept going.

I got even angrier when I saw some people pulling out their phones and started ignoring me. This was why people died! People didn't pay attention and only thought of themselves! If that drunken bastard hadn't chosen to drive that day, Michelle would be alive. How many more people would be alive if they were sober or weren't on their phones?

"And you can make fun of me for saying this all you want, but I know how some of you feel. You feel violated, you feel mistreated, you feel bullied, you feel worthless. And when people say things like that, it only makes it worse! This is why people like Grace Carlisle kill themselves! Did we learn *NOTHING?!?*"

My rage continued to boil inside of me when I saw more people pulling out their phones. How hard was it to just be respectful and listen to me?! Even Casey's phone was ringing behind me. At least my phone was on vibrate, but even then I felt like shit for keeping it on at all. If this was how these people would have acted during the funeral, I might have tried to kill them.

"So can we *please* just get back to what we were here for?" I asked, pleading with them. I wanted to tear all of the hair out of my head and scream. I knew I was probably overreacting to this whole thing, but it didn't excuse what he said.

This whole thing made me want to reconsider coming out with Beth. I knew this kind of harassment was coming if and when we did go public, but now I'm the one freaking out in front of the entire school because someone called me one bad word. If I'd stayed quiet, no one would have ever even remembered what he said or even the assembly itself a week after it happened.

I lost my train of thought that was riddled with self-doubt when I saw half the people in the bleachers in front of me on their phones. Their jaws were on the floor. I had no idea what was happening. At first I thought they were recording my whole outburst to post online and laugh about later, but they'd be watching me while filming it if that were the case. And they'd probably be smiling...

"OH MY GOD!" someone screamed from across the gym.



Everyone's heads rose to see what was going on. More and more people checked their phones and the ones who didn't get texts scrambled to see what was going on, some physically climbing over each other to see what was the matter.

"Holy shit!" Victoria exclaimed from behind me. Jasmine, Tom, and Hannah jumped up to see.

I almost rushed over, too, but stopped myself. Part of me felt like I had to stay calm. Be the face of calm as a storm approached. The irony of staying calm after cussing out the entire school almost made me laugh to myself. I was an emotional wreck.

Kate was about to walk back to see what was the matter when we heard someone scream "*YOU MOTHERFUCKER!*" at the top of their lungs.

I looked up just in time to see our hero Frank Newman dive three rows down the bleachers and tackle Brad off of his seat. People were flying around left and right as the two stumbled down the row in front of them. Everyone around them screamed like banshees. The guys bounced off of the gym floor and Frank slid about three feet away from his prey. After grunting from the pain of hitting the ground, he was completely unfazed by the fall and was back on his feet in seconds.

Any other football players around him rushed in to help Frank batter Brad until he was a bloody pulp. Brad, to his credit, put up a fight. When Jason Sanders kicked Brad in the back of the knee, he screamed in pain and fell to the ground. The guys wasted no time battering him until he was lost in the sea of bodies. Anyone trying to break them up was swallowed by the mass of letterman jackets.

I still had no idea what was going on.

My phone weighed as much as a brick as it sat in my pocket. I dreaded looking inside to see what could possibly have sent the school into a literal riot. But watching the guys kill each other made me reach in, pull my phone out, and check if I got one, too. There was an unread message from an unknown number.

I nearly dropped my phone as I watched the pictures appear on my screen. One after another showing that Spencer was right all along. Brad was stripping Ashley naked and preparing to assault her. I saw the whole thing happen in real time. Everything I'd missed between going to look for Beth and finding Ashley alone with Brad was neatly filled in for me.

The memory played on a loop in my head. My shoulder began to ache all over again from when he shoved me into the wall to make his escape. The taste of the tears that fell down my cheeks as I watched the love of my life lay half-naked on the bed where she was nearly raped.

I should have done something for her and I will never live that guilt down. But now I know it wasn't just me that saw it. There was a fourth person in the room. Someone else saw it happen and they did nothing.

The teachers ran in to break up the brawl, but there were too many football players to separate. In the center of the action, Frank was actually trying to murder the guy. Even Tom, one of the most levelheaded guys I'd ever met, rushed in to help Frank get revenge for Ashley and Spencer. I didn't care if they broke every bone in his body and strangled him with his own guts. I was more than happy to watch the bastard suffer.

The gym was a madhouse. People were screaming and running each other over to get away from the fighting, others starting fights themselves, some were recording everything on their phones and egging the guys on so they would keep fighting, and the rest scrambled for the door to escape before they got involved in things they had no business being involved with.

The teachers themselves were useless. O'Reilly ran back into the room with wild eyes and raced in to help however he could. I think he took a shot to the face at one point because he had to be helped out of the battle by Ms. Kendall as blood streamed down his nose.

It was total anarchy.

I couldn't imagine how Ashley was feeling right now, or if she even knew. I'm sure she would be getting bombarded by calls and texts to see what she was thinking. How would she have reacted if she were there? How could she come back after everyone saw her half-naked and about to be assaulted? I decided it would be best to run off and drive to her house. I wanted to spend the day with her and cheer her up, just like the old days. She needed me. This place was doing fine on its own. I was the last person anyone would look for in that moment.

Before I left the gym, I watched the male teachers finally pry the guys off of Brad. For a brief second, I saw Brad's face. His jaw was slack, his eyes were glazed over. And the blood sprayed from his lip and cheek and forehead. He was one of the tallest guys on the team, but he looked so small, so helpless. At least six guys teamed up to beat the fuck out of him while the rest provided a barrier between the actual fighters and the teachers. He spit up some more blood and it trickled down his chin. Mr. Hardy grabbed him under the arm and pulled him from harm.

It was so sweet seeing him get what he deserved.

## Beth

My heart raced with every step. I never felt more powerful. I gotta say, though, it was pretty touch and go for a bit there.

I waited outside the school after I finally removed all evidence from the computers. It only took a few minutes to scrub anything linking the texts back to me. I triple-checked to be sure I was safe, though. Satisfied, I walked out of the computer lab and shut the lights behind me. There were already a whole bunch of people running and screaming down the hallway, oblivious to my presence because I was as quiet and noticeable as a mouse in a field. I just fell into the crowd as they ran away, just another bystander.

Dozens of people made their escape from whatever had happened in the gym. Those dozens quickly rose to the hundreds. It was a traffic jam as people rushed for their lockers or straight to the main doors to escape whatever was going on inside that gym. I simply could not wait to see the inevitable pictures and videos from inside of the gym that would be plastered all over every social media platform that existed.

People my age could not help themselves when it came to recording the crimes of others around them. Seeing a Freshman girl's Snapchat story of her donning a gas mask bong was the highlight of my day a few weekends ago. How stupid can you be to record yourself doing something that could get you arrested or suspended? I knew it was only a matter of time before evidence of whatever was going on spread like wildfire online for all the world to see.

I started taking bets in my head on if O'Reilly would survive until Homecoming after this.

Lauren stumbled out of the school in a daze. She seemed like she was going to vomit. One guy almost shoved her over as he escaped the school, but she was so out of it that she barely reacted. I figured then was as good a time as any to make my presence known.

She was nearly in her car when I ran over to her. "Lauren! Hey, Laur, wait up!"

It took her a second to register who I was. She blinked a few times. "Beth?"

"What's going on in there? Why's everyone screaming?"

"I... come on, I'll tell you on the way."

I reached for the passenger's door. "Where are we going?"

"Ashley's house."

Lauren was hyperventilating for most of the ride out to Ashley's house. She was also driving very erratically, speeding through the suburbs as if we were being chased by the police. Given what I did, it would not surprise me in the least to know we were being followed by someone. She was driving so poorly and her breathing was so bad, I thought I would have to force her to pull over and drive for her. But we arrived at Ashley's house in record time and Lauren sprinted to the door. I followed at a brisk pace and watched her slam the doorbell over and over.

"ASH!" she screamed as she pounded on the door. "Ash, are you home?!"

No one answered.

Lauren tensed up and paced back and forth. "Fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck no-no-no-no-no..."

"Lauren, what's going on?" I asked with genuine concern that she was going to have a heart attack on Ash's doorstep. "What happened at school?"

"Fuck-fuck-fuck, I-I-I'll tell you later. ASHLEY! ASHLEY OPEN THE DOOR!" She continued to batter the door until her hand was bright red.

I was about to step in and pull her away before she broke her hand when we heard the lock click and the door swung open. Ashley stood there before us, confused. She was rubbing her eyes and had trouble focusing on us. I thought she was high for a moment, but when she yawned I realized she was just half-asleep.

“Jesus Christ, what’s the matter with—”

Lauren lunged at her and gave her the firmest hug I have ever seen in my life. She nearly took Ashley to the ground with her momentum. Ashley held her tight before looking at her and then looking at me, trying to make sense of what was going on. I was not there so I had to pretend not to know. So I just shrugged my shoulders but made sure to look very concerned. I wasn’t acting, though. They both scared me a little.

“Oh, thank God you’re okay!” Lauren cried into Ash’s shoulder. “I thought something terrible happened to you.”

“Why wouldn’t I be...?” she carefully asked.

Ashley and I stood through a minute of Lauren crying her eyes out and stumbling over her words before she finally said something coherent. “Something happened at school and-and-and...” Lauren began to cry harder. Ashley gently rubbed her back, trying in vain to calm her down.

“Have you checked your phone in the past half-hour?” I asked. I worried we wouldn’t be the only ones coming over to check in on her. I needed to get them inside the house where we could escape prying eyes.

Ashley shook her head, fearing what I had to say. After the loss of Michelle, knowing there was something bad coming must have filled her exhausted mind with terrible dread. It could have been anyone that got hurt. Spencer, Frank, Kate, Casey or Heather, one of our parents... Her tired mind must have been racing while assuming the worst had happened.

If there was ever someone in the world who was better suited to deliver this news, it was us. “We have a lot to talk about.”

## Ashley

Lauren and Beth sat me down and beat around the bush for the longest time. They asked how I was and how I've been since we last met up. I was falling back asleep on the couch as they talked, the adrenaline I was running on from Lauren trying to break down the door finally wearing off. If Lauren didn't keep hugging me, I would have absolutely passed out. I stayed up late watching Netflix to keep my mind busy. It was really the only way I could fall asleep anymore, with a YouTube video or movie or show playing. Or drinking.

They asked me what I had been doing and I told them. I fell asleep watching *Breaking Bad* for the fifth time and slept through one of the last few episodes. They woke me up during the opening scene of the episode *Ozymandias*, one of the best episodes of television of all time in my humble opinion. I was getting pretty annoyed that they were being so cryptic and just wanted to go back to bed. My brain was still so hazy and it took them making me a coffee to actually get me to pay attention.

What they told me next, there was no preparation for. There was no "good" way to say it. They held onto my phone and made sure I didn't get the chance to see it from a total stranger. Even though the volume was off, I could see the screen flickering on and off as text after text and phone call after phone call came in.

"We held an assembly today," Lauren began, her hand wrapped around mine, "and something happened. With Brad..."

Lauren explained everything. The pictures, the fight, school security coming in after she left to keep the peace. Apparently Brad was beaten to hell and the guys dogpiled on him and just kept hitting. That was when Lauren showed me her phone and allowed me to scroll through the pictures.

While I looked at the pictures, Beth checked my phone after asking for the passcode. "I'm going to scroll through the texts and voicemails so you don't hear or see anything that might set you off."

The quality of the pictures that that creep took were very good, although there wasn't much to see. It was everything I had suspected happened. Brad took my clothes off and stared at me. I wondered if he was having second thoughts. Maybe he was just savoring the moment. If there was a video, there might be more, but the slideshow gave me everything I needed.

Watching it happen more or less in real time only angered me more. The school betrayed me. Everyone had been saying Brad was a creep for over a year, but nobody did anything. I came forward and they ignored me. It was humiliating to sit there after running away and be told they would only keep an eye on him; all while being casually reminded that making false accusations against a fellow student is a serious offense that they would not take lightly if it turned out he was innocent. I hoped O'Reilly choked on his dinner that night.

Surprisingly, I didn't freak out like I thought I would when Lauren was explaining everything. I was calm. So calm, I even surprised myself. I don't know if I was numb to it all or if there was nothing else that could hurt me so much, but I didn't lose my cool. After weeks and weeks of being beaten down, I felt like I was finally broken. All the happiness inside me was gone. I was just a doll. A lobotomized version of me. If I could bring myself to go back to that place, I'd be the laughing stock of the entire school district.

*"The Girl Who Couldn't Even Manage To Get Raped." Fitting title. I'm that much of a failure.*

Beth looked up from my phone. "Would you like to see Frank kicking the shit out of Brad? A lot of people recorded it and sent you the video." I said sure and she played the video with the audio turned off. I made her turn it up.

It was everything that she advertised. Even though Frank was nearly a hundred pounds smaller than Brad is, he destroyed him. It was like watching a seventh grader attack a UFC fighter. Pure hatred is one helluva drug. When the rest of the team joined in, Brad was lost in the mass of bodies. I only knew where he was based on the guys stomping the ground or leaning over to throw punches.

When the teachers and O'Reilly began to drag the guys away, Brad finally emerged and his face and shirt was more bloody than a professional wrestler that got hit in the face with a chair. He stumbled around and needed Mr. Hardy to keep him upright. An uppercut from one of the guys sent Brad right back to the ground. The crack of the guy's fist connecting with Brad's jaw was better than sex.

God, was that satisfying to watch. That fucker deserved this so badly.

"There are so many more videos," Beth said. "And a lot of texts asking if you're doing okay. People are really worried about you right now. They hope Brad gets shot for what he did."

"Are you okay?" Lauren asked with genuine concern.

I waited to answer as the video played over again. It was just as satisfying to watch the second time over as it was for the first time. But when the little pause icon flashed on screen, the euphoria faded. Every time the video played, it lost its luster. It was like cocaine. I do so much and then I lose my taste for it so I need to do more. Life is like cocaine: the longer you live, the harder it is to get that rush back from when you were younger.

I already attempted suicide once and I wasn't even eighteen. How could I keep doing this until I was eighty? I never felt more scared in my entire life.

"Yeah. I'm okay."

"You can be honest with us," Lauren said. "We're here for you."

"I'm serious. I'm alright. Watching him get exactly what he deserves is so good. I mean, he's been floating around school for so long without anything happening to him. But now they have to do something and that's... I'm glad. I'm really glad."

It was a lie. But it made them feel better. Is that a sin? Lying to make someone else okay?

"The one thing I want to know," I continued, "is who was in the bathroom? And who sent the video?"

Lauren shook her head. "I don't know."

"And I was at the dentist so I missed the whole thing," Beth chimed in. "I'm seeing this for the first time, too. But whoever it was, they did us a favor because Brad cannot ever show his face back there again. Someone might actually try to kill him if he does."

"I just want to know who was in the bathroom," I said. "They could have stopped it..."

"Maybe," Beth said. "So do you want to watch Breaking Bad with us? It's one of my favorites."

## Lauren

Breaking Bad is also one of my favorite shows. Even though I'm not a huge fan of violence, both Ashley and Beth got me into it when we were dating. I started watching it with Ashley, but we broke up before we started the final season. Beth and I finished the show together within the first month of us being together. Our mutual love of the show was one of the first things we discovered we had in common when we began exploring a relationship.

One character that stuck out in my mind was Hank. Even though he was a sexist, racist, asshole cop that just wanted to make people laugh, regardless of how gross his humor was, he was still a loving guy who cared about his family. Even if he said the wrong thing and didn't know how to be vulnerable, he still showed it with his anxiety attacks and relationship with Marie.

The one episode where he finally discovers the identity of the mythical Heisenberg—the mythical drug lord that had been terrorizing his psyche for season after season—was none other than his own brother-in-law is one of the finest examples of acting in the show. Ashley is more of the filmmaking type than I am so she was better at identifying these kinds of things than I was, but the look he gives while reading the book when it all clicks in his mind is very well done. Even a vanilla fan of cinema like me (as Ashley once called me) could see that.

As we sat and watched the show together, probably the weirdest show to watch with your friends after something traumatic happens, I looked over at Beth as I held Ashley's hands tight. I was expecting her to be making a face at me for being so affectionate with my ex, but after everything we've been through I know she understands that this is purely platonic. I still love Ashley to some extent, and I think I always will, but she's more of a friend now than anything else. Instead of making a face, Beth was watching the show and smiling to herself.

Even though nothing funny was going on, she was smiling. I wasn't sure if she had just thought of a joke or she was just daydreaming or if she was content with the three of us hanging out together like actual friends. Some people just smile and don't even notice it.

Then I thought about how she ditched our assembly without notifying anyone. You need a parent to sign you out early from school and I haven't seen Beth's Mom in months. How could she have left early without being picked up by her? Maybe he called ahead to let her leave on her own? Was that allowed?

Even though I was really drunk at the party and don't remember much of it after I blacked out, I remember the lead-up to walking in on Brad and Ashley. Beth had gone away to go to the bathroom and she was gone for a long time. I got lonely and went looking for her. That's how I stumbled on Brad nearly raping Ash.

When I needed Beth most, at the first major assembly of the year and one that involved the death of one of my closest friends, she left without telling anyone. She left me out there to flounder like a flounder when she knows I fear public speaking. I could have broken down and sobbed and she wouldn't have been there to help me. After what happened with the homophobic guy, I was shocked I even had the balls to stand up to him. Beth would have stabbed the guy's eyes out in front of everyone. But she abandoned me and left without telling me. I never even told her about what the guy said. I was more worried about Ashley than me.

Beth treats Student Council like it's the actual U.S. Congress. She intentionally runs things with an iron fist to make things easier for me. Why would she not attend the first major assembly? In any other circumstance, she would put her fingerprints all over this and give it her seal of approval only if

everything went beyond perfectly. The events of the assembly would have sent her up a wall and she'd be passive-aggressively venting about it a month later.

I wonder if this was how Hank Schrader felt when he discovered the truth. All the little details connecting. Walt drove into traffic to keep Hank from discovering the truth of what he was doing. He faked a call claiming Hank's wife was nearly killed in a car crash. I know it's just a show and there is no such thing as Heisenberg or Hank Schrader, but I never identified so much with a character before in my life.

We left Ashley's house after a couple hours. Casey and Heather called Ashley and asked if they could come over and spend some time with her. We decided to give them some alone time together. Lauren hugged us both goodbye. It was nice to see that she and Beth had been getting on so well together.

Outside of the house, there was a news van parked beside my car. A reporter was standing around with the cameraman and her producer. When they saw us leaving, they ran up to us and asked us if Ashley Williams was home and if we could get her to come outside.

"If you're here in the next five minutes, I'm calling my father," I warned them. "He's a police sergeant and one call to him about the drug deal your cameraman just did and you're not filming anything for a long time. So back off, you disgusting leech cunt, or I'll fucking end you."

She had nothing else to say after that and they just kinda stood around as I marched over to my car. I pulled out my phone and pantomimed making a call. They boarded their van and pulled a few houses down, acting like they were going to leave. I knew this was just the beginning and there would be more press. I sent Ashley a text warning her that they were lingering outside. I saw her peer outside the window before drawing the curtains tight.

"Nicely done, babe," Beth cooed as she slowly reached her hand up my thigh from the solitude of my car.

I didn't react. I was furious now and wanted nothing more than to be alone. I'm still not sure what I was more angry about.

On one hand, those vampires were going to try and get the top story on the five o'clock news. They didn't want anything to do with the poor girl's mental health or safety. Ashley could blow her brains out live on air and they wouldn't rush to her aid. They would just triple-check if the camera didn't have its lens cap on and then get some closeups of the dead teenage girl on the pavement in front of them. They don't care about anything or anyone, except their ratings.

On the other hand, I'm almost completely convinced my girlfriend watched my ex nearly be raped, did nothing to stop it, and then sent pictures she took of the attempted rape to everyone in school. She tried to ruin Ashley's life and now she was trying to grope me.

I have never identified with a fictional character more than Hank Schrader before in my life.



## **SEVERANCE PAY**

## Ashley

**FLASHBACK:**

**CUT TO:**

**INT. MY HOUSE, DAY OF THE ASSEMBLY - EVENING**

After what happened at the assembly happened and my life became an even bigger joke, I decided it wasn't worth it any more. I had no idea what was gonna happen next. Would it have influenced me to go through with it? Or would the prospect of a better tomorrow after wading through an ocean of shit maybe changed my mind?

I really don't know.

My phone rang and rang while I sat at home. After four consecutive missed calls, I reached over and turned the fucking thing off. I tossed it onto my bed when I got back into my room. My body somehow found a few more tears to shed as I curled up onto my bed. After Lauren and Beth left, I was alone again. My Mom wouldn't be home for hours and I had nothing in the world but time. I'd been strong while they were there. Numb, emotionless. I played my part well and no one suspected I was withering away inside.

The drawer was slightly ajar when I reached for it. I took out my special pencil case and poured the contents onto the top of the desk. Even though Spencer threw out all my free-bees, I still knew how to get some. I wouldn't be eating anything at lunch for a couple days, but that didn't matter anymore. I formed the most sloppy line in my whole life and rolled up the novelty bill once again like I'd done a hundred times before. I considered just blowing it away and going back to bed. That thought quickly passed before I could entertain it a second longer.

I inhaled and felt like I was going to explode. Everything was moving at a thousand miles an hour. I went down to the basement and paced around inside what used to be my Dad's den. The carpet was soft and I liked how it felt between my toes. My anger was growing and growing. It reached a breaking point when I looked in the mirror propped against the wall. The mere sight of myself was nauseating. I was done living inside this body. I knew what I had to do.

Sitting in my car with the AC on was comforting. I didn't use much of my emergency stash because I worried about chickening out and not having any left over so I was already starting to comedown. With what mind-altering energy was left inside of me, I opened the glovebox. I stole the pistol from my mother's drawer before I left for Spencer's. If I didn't have the energy to go inside his house, I was going to drive to the boonies and finish this. Somehow, I had forgotten about it when I drove back to my house. I think I was just putting it off until after I got my last fix.

I studied every detail of the gun. It was a smaller caliber variant of a Glock. Spencer showed me how to shoot it when he went with me and my Dad to go shooting one day while we were dating. My Dad suggested going shooting as a vain attempt at intimidating him and seeing if he was worthy of his pathetic excuse for a daughter. Spencer was the generic white Texas boy who loved shooting and by the end of the day and a few hundred rounds of ammunition fired, they were the best of friends. Spencer had that effect on people. I envied it. Dad was gone from my life soon after.

The metal felt cool when I placed it under my chin. My hands were shaking like crazy. I closed my eyes and gathered the strength to do it. Every breath was heavy and fast. My last thought was about

the half-assed note I left on my bed for her or the police to find. I said one last goodbye to my Mom before I pulled the trigger.

I opened my eyes and wondered if I was dead and this was my afterlife. Then I looked down and realized I was still alive. Nothing had happened. I got incredibly dizzy and almost dropped the gun as the world spun around me. Lifting the gun up to get a better look, I saw the safety was still on. My stupid fucking dumbass forgot to undo the safety on a gun I had shot a hundred times before. This was the second time I managed to fail at hurting myself. I was such a fucking moron. I threw the gun back into the glovebox and began to cry and cry and cry. I beat the shit out of the steering wheel as a way to get my frustrations out. My forearms were on fire by the time I stopped. I slumped back in my chair and began to have another panic attack. My body shook and I got incredibly cold. I just wanted the pain to go away.

I instantly regretted what I had tried to do. As much as I wanted to die, I didn't want to kill myself. It is a miserable existence to hate to live, but I was afraid to die. I don't believe in an afterlife, but the thought of leaving my family and friends behind hurt so badly. Hindsight is a bitch and she was kicking the shit out of me at that moment.

I felt trapped with nowhere to go. How could I show my face around school anymore if people knew what I tried to do? Lauren would never speak to me again, I just knew it. There was no one I could possibly open up to now that Michelle was gone. Everyone would judge me or spread rumors as soon as they heard. And after the assembly, I was doomed to be a laughingstock forever.

Then it hit me. The one person in the world who would tell me the truth, whether I wanted to hear it or not. I reached for my phone and made the most anxiety-inducing call of my life. The phone rang only once before it was answered.

"Hey. Hey, what's up?... Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay. But, uh, hey, I know you guys were just here, but could we talk about something? Alone? I know it's really short notice and you're probably really busy, but... Are you sure?... Thank you. Yeah, I'm just sitting in my car outside my house. I don't want to go back inside... Thank you... Thank you."

Hanging up left me alone again with the cavalry on the way. She took forever to get there, though. At least it felt that way. She managed to get to my place within twenty minutes. I forgot how close we lived to each other. I saw her coming from my rear view mirror and braced myself for whatever was to come. The door opened and she sat down beside me. Neither of us spoke. We just stared out the windshield at my house. It was a great house. I'm glad we didn't lose it when my parents broke up. I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. It was one of the things I was scared most about that comes with growing up. Leaving home.

"Don't feel any pressure," Beth said. "You can talk whenever you're ready."

"I just don't know what to say is all," I said.

"I understand."

"Do you?"

"Of course I do," she said. "It's not like I've never felt sad before. I mean, I'm not depressed like you are—"

"I don't have depression," I snapped at her.

It was a bullshit lie, I knew I had it for years. Ever since I was eleven, I knew there was something wrong with me, but I was too afraid to admit it to anyone. Therapy and drugs scared the hell out of me. Ironical since I'd been doing the latter for the past year. The truth is just hearing that word was like the dirtiest slur imaginable for me. Something I couldn't control that could be weaponized to hurt me. After what happened to Grace, I'd say I deserved it.

"I'm not saying you do..." she said, taken aback from my outburst.

"Fuck... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap. I..." I sighed. "I know... *something* is wrong. I just don't have a diagnosis and I don't want to be one of those people who gives one to themselves 'cause some people find that... offensive or whatever. Like you're labeling yourself or something."

"Funny. I heard that was actually really common."

"Really?"

"Not everyone can afford therapists or psychiatrists or doctors. Especially people on the spectrum. Or people who don't want to face discrimination after actually *getting* a diagnosis."

"Huh."

"Are you alright?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"An honest one," she answered. "Because I'm really worried about you. Your mental health is in the fucking toilet— no offense— and you look like you haven't slept or eaten in days. Between your drug use and your overdrinking and your general behavior since Michelle's funeral, your actions could be classified as self-destructive at best and displaying massive red flags about wanting to do something permanent at worst."

"What are you? A psychologist?" I asked without so much as cracking a smile.

"I have a lot of experience suffering from stuff in my head I also can't control," she said. "And I'm pretty really good at reading people."

"What am I? A copy of Moby fucking Dick?"

She thought it over. "More like a reprint of The Anarchist's Cookbook."

That brought a smile to my face. Just a small one because I knew she was right. Minus the tips for domestic terrorism and drug manufacturing, I was pretty much as big of a mess as anything or anyone involved in that book. I'm not admitting to reading it, but the Internet does not hold secrets.

I still had a smile on my face when I rubbed my eyes and said, "I can't do this anymore."

"Do what?"

"Just..." I extended my arms and motioned to the world around me. "*This! Everything!* It's not worth it. I feel like I'm being stoned to death and every second I live is like another rock being thrown at me. I can't take it anymore."

"Don't say that."

"There's no other way to describe it. You can't possibly understand how much I hate waking up in the morning. It just means I didn't die quietly in my sleep and now my body has to do it all again. It's like an abusive relationship. I get to live, which means I can eat and drink and have sex and do coke and watch bad movies with my friends, but then eventually I stop doing that and I'm in limbo. Like, there will be periods of time where I'm not hungry and I don't want to get drunk or high and I have nobody to have sex with and my friends are busy and I'm at home alone with my thoughts... No matter how happy I may feel, that happiness is fleeting and I can't keep that feeling going for more than a few hours. I feel broken."

"Did you ever reach out to your mother about this?" she asked. "Does she help?"

"I didn't say I'm alone to sound dramatic," I said with some bitterness. "She's home for a few hours each day and then is right back out the door before I can wake up in the morning. Sometimes she never even comes home if things are that bad in the office. If I'm lucky, she'll have made dinner before she went to bed on the days she's actually home. If not, she'll just order takeout to be sent to the house so

I can eat. And while I'm eating pizza or Chinese, she's on a flight to Utah or Florida or Chicago or wherever she has to go for her job."

"I don't know what to say," she said calmly. "That sounds very difficult."

"And also," I went on, "she didn't care that I ran away."

"What are you talking about? Of course she cared."

"For a day," I spat. "Maybe not even that. She probably just pretended to and used it as an excuse to take off from work."

"What did she do that day you came home?" she asked.

"She took me out shopping and we got food and stuff, but she was back in the office in the morning. She texted me all day, but then she could only text every couple hours the day after that. And the day after that, she might as well have blocked my number. She doesn't care. I'm just a tax credit to her. Someone who will take care of her when she's old." I teared up for a moment and my voice cracked. I felt like such a terrible daughter for saying those intrusive thoughts out loud. I cleared my throat. "I was so happy that she actually cared because for one fucking day, I felt like her daughter."

"I feel the same way," Beth said. "Sometimes. My mom is never home either. She travels a lot for work, too. And for what it's worth, I haven't seen my dad in years. He died when I was little. Third grade. I can't really remember him that well."

That sobered me up a bit. I forgot other people had feelings, too. "Fuck. I'm sorry."

"What happened, happened," she said without showing concern. "I can't change the past. And besides, I still have my mom, even if she isn't home that much either. And Lauren."

I winced at hearing her name. Even after all this time, knowing they were together seemed wrong to me. "Yeah. You do."

"I'm sorry for how everything went down between you and her," she said. "I know you hate me for being with her."

"I don't hate you for it. I hated you for how you treated me."

"I don't want to fight given what's going on with you, but you weren't exactly the kindest to me and Grace last year either."

She wasn't wrong. I tried to get revenge on her to impress Kara in the pettiest way possible. It didn't work. Kara ended up being the one to finish things. "I'm sorry." I didn't know what else to say. "I'll never forgive myself for what happened to her. I hope you know that I would take it all back if I could. I am so, so sorry."

I thought it was finally going to happen. She was going to punch me in the face and keep punching me until I was dead. I deserved it. What happened with Grace still haunts my nightmares. The assembly after Memorial Day will be burned into my head for the rest of my life. They all knew who did it. Everyone was staring at Kara with cold faces, her reputation as the Queen Bee being taken from her without anyone needing to say a word.

"I can't forgive you," she said quietly. "Not yet. But now that I know how bad things are with you, I'm not angry anymore. What you did and what Kara did were terrible, but she was the one who sent her over the edge. What's done is done and for whatever it's worth, I'm sorry for all the things I said to you, too." She exhaled slowly. Her eyes were closed, but I swear I saw some tears begin to form before I looked away. "Now let's get back to you wanting to kill yourself. I want you to get help and I am here for you."

"I don't want to kill myself."

"But you wish you weren't alive, right?" She really could read people. I glanced down at the glovebox to see if it was still open. It wasn't. "There's over sixteen million depressed people in America," she went on. "You're not the only one."

"That doesn't make me feel any less shitty."

"But it means you don't have to go through it alone. Nobody's alone in the world unless they shut themselves off from the rest of us. And lately it seems like you've been doing that. Lauren told me about you quitting cheerleading. Casey and Heather are worried sick."

"They're doing a shitty job of showing it," I countered. "They haven't even come out here to see me."

"Really? Because they told Lauren they called you and *you* didn't pick up." She wasn't wrong once again. There was no winning this. I was just deflecting and blaming other people for being a shitty friend. "They're both worried about you. Lauren is really worried about you, too. Especially after what happened to Michelle, she's been worried—"

"That I'll kill myself? Cause I won't."

"Does she know that?" she asked. "She seemed pretty concerned after she left your place earlier today. I could barely calm her down." I wouldn't let myself cry in front of her. Not after everything we'd been through. I wouldn't let her judge me anymore than she already has. "You can't keep acting like this."

"Like what?" I asked as the anger began to consume me.

"Apathetic. Self-destructive. You need to get a hold of yourself."

She saw I was being difficult and gave it to me as honestly and bluntly as possible. Exactly why I asked her to come down here to begin with. Even though I was trying to make myself the good guy that could do no wrong and make it everyone else's fault that I was fucked up in the head, I needed to hear this.

"If you want to be like this," she continued, "fine, whatever, but I'm going to tell you the honest truth. Whether or not you actually listen is up to you. Lauren is the love of my life and nothing will tear us apart or ruin that. I would destroy the world in a heartbeat if it meant she could be happy. One thing that would crush her is if you were to go away and there was nothing I can do about it. If there is a way I can prevent a lifetime of heartache for her, I'd do it. And if that means talking you off a ledge, I'll do it. I owe her that much.

"But if you're going to be a stubborn bitch who can't get a word of advice through her thick skull, that's your problem. I came here to help you when you asked for it and you're intentionally ignoring me and blowing everything I say off. I can go to my grave saying I did all I could and my conscience will be clear. Whether you listen to me or not is up to you. Bad stuff happened to you. I'm sorry I can't change the past, but letting that dominate your life isn't healthy. You need to get help. *Professional* help. Not locking yourself in your room to get high or drink yourself stupid until you pass out and do it all over again the next day.

"And just know that you're hurting Lauren regardless of what you do when you act like this. So you can either keep beating yourself up mentally and keep doing drugs and drinking yourself into a stupor every Friday night or you can shut the fuck up and listen to help when it comes to you. It's your choice."

I let her words sink in. It was exactly what I needed to hear.

"If you want me to go, I will," she said. "But I don't want to tell the cops that I was the last one to see you alive. If you need me to stay with you, I will. I owe it to Lauren *and* you to make sure you're okay. Take some time and think about what you want."

We sat in silence while I considered my options. I was thinking back to *Breaking Bad* and the one early episode where Walt made the list of reasons to kill the drug dealer in Jesse's basement. It was a goofy scene. As if Walter White of all people cared about *Judeo-Christian Values*. I took a page from his book and made a pro and con list of my own. Reasons why I should and shouldn't forget to undo the safety. I had an entire list of reasons to and not to do it.

Lauren was the one pro that counted for more than a dozen other cons.

I asked Beth to step out of the car for a minute so I could go back inside. She accepted and never asked why. I walked into my mom's room and placed the gun back in the drawer. Shutting it softly and closing the door behind me, I walked back into my room to sit in the dark. I turned my phone back on and saw I got a call from my mom fairly recently. She said there was food coming in the next half-hour or so and said she'd be back tomorrow while I was at school. I had something to live for again and it was a free dinner.

That was when I decided to make a change. I *needed* to change.

Thinking long and hard about what Beth said, I walked over to my desk and took the pencil case out of my drawer. I took the stamp bags out and held them in my hands. They seemed to burn against my skin, a warm sensation that invited me in. But I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction. I walked over to the toilet and held them over the water. My hand slowly turned like Bilbo Baggins when he tried to drop the One Ring. When the fell and plopped in the water below, I reached out to flush it so fast that I almost punched the porcelain. I feared what would happen if I gave myself a chance to think my decision over.

Two hundred bucks down the drain. It was worth it.

This was just the first part of my plan. I was going to get better. I'd start talking to people more, I would get back onto the cheer squad, and I'd be a better friend to Heather and Casey and Lauren and Kate. And Beth, if she'd even have me. Most of all, I was going to sober up. No more drowning myself in alcohol and cocaine to numb the pain. I'd endure it all by myself and I'd be better off for it. I was going to be a mountain. A strong, unshakable mountain.

I grabbed my phone and walked out the door. Beth was waiting for me on a chair we had on our porch.

"Do you want to come inside? My Mom ordered me takeout and she usually always orders more so I can have lunch for the next day. And maybe we could go to Spencer's after? If you're not busy, anyway."

She smiled and accepted. She had a pretty smile. I wanted to see it again. I wanted to make up for all the times I stamped it out over the past year.

I heard the doorbell ring a few minutes later. My dinner arrived. I quietly thanked my mom for getting it for me. After doing something like that for me, I was glad she wouldn't be coming home to find her dead daughter cooking inside her car in the Texas heat. Beth and I ate in the dining room. She didn't take much food, but we had a nice talk.

It was nice.

## Spencer

When I woke up from my nap, my phone was lagging because of all the texts and calls. It took me a solid five minutes for my brain to stop being so foggy that I couldn't even unlock my phone. Part of me wishes it hadn't ever cleared and I could have just fallen back asleep. Nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to see.

Despite all of the requests for updates on how I'm feeling, the first thing I managed to see was the pictures of Ashley. Apparently around half the people in school got their own copy of the pictures of Brad stripping Ashley and trying to assault her. Whatever happened to make him stop doesn't matter. I want to know who was taking the pictures instead of stopping him so I can beat their brains out for leaving Ashley to die. I stared at them for a solid five minutes in utter disbelief. But despite my disgust, I couldn't bring myself to delete them. I wanted to keep them. This wasn't only something I had. Everyone had proof now. Proof that I was right.

And people did realize that I was right because half of the hundred plus texts I got were guys from the team telling me they were sorry for doubting me. Dwayne was begging for me to forgive him. Justin and Jamar felt terrible for taking my spot. Tom said he and Frank beat the shit out of Brad when he tried to run. And Frank said he wanted to meet up later and talk.

Besides the texts, I got dozens and dozens of voicemails and missed calls from people trying to get my two cents on the matter. There were even *parents* leaving messages for me. It felt weird. Is this how they treat the wife of a President who just got shot? Just people hounding her for a quote while she tries to imagine a world without the love of her life?

The one phone call that stuck out to me was Coach Mullens.

"Hey Spence. Coach here. I heard about what happened with Ashley and I wanted to... apologize... When you come back to school, I wanna meet with you and talk about what happened. Frank said you should be back on Monday, but feel free to stop by whenever you're ready because, uh... we have a lot to talk about. See you later."

That may have been the first time I'd heard Coach actually sound sincerely apologetic or genuinely upset in the three years I'd known him. I'd never heard his voice quiver so much before. He could be a really nice guy and be down to earth with you if you needed someone to talk to, but never like this. Tell me he was being held at gunpoint and forced to say those things and I would believe you a thousand percent.

Over the course of the weekend, dozens of people came by to try to get me to talk about the incident. There was even a news van just outside for an hour or so. I made sure they couldn't see me and never went outside. They tried knocking and creeping around outside, but I just waited them out while watching Netflix. Being a shut-in due to my injuries may have made me socially inept, but damn if it didn't teach me how to make the days go by while doing absolutely nothing productive. Surprisingly, the newsboys didn't take the hint and stuck around for a while. And if one van would leave, another would take its place.

He came back home around six and was confused as to why the media were trying to talk to him. I thought he was going to pull a gun on them or something.

"Are they here for you?" he asked as he made sure the front door was locked.

"Apparently I'm a hero."

"Just don't let them scratch the paint on my truck. I just got it detailed."



Shortly after he left, I got a visit from two people I never expected would be seen in public together: Ashley and Beth. They snuck over the fence and knocked on the back door. Knowing that nobody could get through the gate or around the fence separating the front and back yards without really trying, I gave a little peek through the curtains and saw them waving at me. I let them in as soon as possible and locked the door behind them.

“Did they see you come in?” I asked while glancing around between the curtains.

“I seriously doubt it,” Ashley said. “We kinda hopped the fence.”

“And went through three of your neighbor’s yards to get here,” Beth finished. “The only way someone would have seen us is if they were looking for us. And who would suspect the two of us?” They both gave me innocent smiles and batted their eyelashes.

I sat back down on the couch and propped my leg back up on my big fluffy pillow. “I’d get you something to drink or eat or whatever, but—”

“No need to worry,” Beth said. “I’ll get us something.” She left and Ashley took a place in my dad’s chair. We stared at each other for a solid minute before I finally broke the tension.

“I heard he got the shit kicked out of him.”

“I wasn’t there,” she said. “I saw the pictures. And videos.”

I saw them, too. Every conceivable angle of Brad getting his ass kicked by Frank, Tom, and the other guys. I just wish I wasn’t hurt. I would have strangled the guy with his own belt if I was there. Finished what I started back in the locker room. Brad was really lucky I was M.I.A. because I would have been the first *and* last one inside that pile.

“Speaking of... pictures...”

She cleared her throat. “I guess you can tell your Coach I wasn’t lying after all.”

“Heh. Yeah. He wants to see me when I get back to school. I think he’s gonna apologize.”

“Do you think you’re going to be allowed back on the team?”

“Maybe.”

She sat forward a little bit. “Do you want to go back?”

## Beth

Something I have always found tedious is making yourself busy while other people talk. Going to fetch water, checking the grill, pretending to need to use the bathroom. If I was not meant to be a part of a conversation, especially this one, Ashley should have cut out the middleman and not invited me in the first place.

It was rather shocking that she asked me to be there with her instead of Lauren. Lauren was actually there when it happened. I figured she wanted me to go since I was the one she called to come over to her place and talk her off the ledge. Dinner was good.

Ashley's near-suicide was pointless. It did not serve anyone to have her dead, least of all me. Her living was vital. Much as I may have hated her before, I was actually growing rather indifferent to her. Maybe even fond of her to some extent. She seemed to be making a conscious effort to change and make amends for what happened. The conversation we had in her car made me rethink my stance on her. It was humanizing. Before then, I only saw her as an obstacle. A claw trying to rip Lauren from my grasp. Now? I see her as nothing more than a scared little girl that needs someone to love and protect her. It would be for her own good.

If no one else would, the task fell to me and I would accept it with open arms.

While we were eating, she asked me if we could go visit Spencer. "Would you... come with me? I really need someone there and Lauren has been acting weird lately. Plus you're really smart and I kinda want your input on what to do for when I go back on Monday."

Hearing someone actually recognize my talents was the biggest turn-on I have ever heard. Not even Lauren acknowledged that I was the smartest one in this school full of braindead Neanderthals. This remains my biggest criticism of her as a person. She simply did not realize what she had. I am yours, Ashley Williams, my beloved. Even if I was your second choice.

This is a joke, by the way.

"Yeah, of course!"

"Hopefully his dad will be gone by then and the news won't be snooping around. If they are, we're going to have to go through his neighbor's backyard to get in. You up for a little fence climbing?"

"Oh, aren't you a little sneaky spy?" I said with a grin.

She smiled. "You're sure you're up for this? You don't need to if you don't want to."

"It's okay. I promise. You shouldn't be alone right now. And besides, I don't have plans."

A lie. I have an entire future to plan. Especially with Homecoming on the horizon and the Anniversary fast approaching, I needed my mind in tip-top shape to prepare for the inevitable hell that was coming.

Fast forward past us jumping over fences and having a sitdown with Spencer in his living room suddenly she was having a private meeting with her little ex-boyfriend while I was left retrieving refreshments. Which means of course I am standing in the doorway listening in on their conversation. How long do they think I will spend getting them cans of pop? They have to know that I am standing right there. Right?

The topic of Spencer's future with the football team had me quite interested. Apparently our dear little quarterback has decided to hang up his cleats and retire from active competition. This was actually shocking to me as I never thought someone would throw away a future that involved all the money, partying, and promiscuous women he could imagine just because of a string of bad luck. I was tickled

pink to know I had that effect on someone. His whole life was thrown in the dumpster because I chose to not open a bathroom door.

No one should ever underestimate me again. Not Spencer, not Brad, not O'Reilly, and especially not Lauren. It said a lot that Lauren continued to doubt me after all I had done for her and Ashley was asking me to replace her as her private confidant to meet with Spencer, someone I have had limited interactions with. I had to play this perfectly. One less adversary is the dream.

All it takes is a perfect nudge in the right direction and he is as good as gone.

## Spencer

"I think I'm just over it," I admitted, realizing that it was becoming real.

I had been thinking this for weeks now since everything started going to shit. It's like when you realize your pet is getting old and slowly dying. You want to hold onto how things have been and pretend nothing is wrong and just saying something makes it real. Actually saying I wanted to quit the football team was the hardest and easiest thing I have ever said in my life.

Beth reentered the room with some cokes and Ashley took one. "Thank you." She turned back to me. "If you really want to quit, you know I'll be there for you."

"You're gonna be the only one," I said as I cracked open my can. "The guys are gonna hate me. Coach is gonna hate me. And my dad..." I laughed, cold as the Arctic. "Either of you have a spare bedroom I could use? He sure as shit isn't letting me stay here after Monday."

"He won't seriously kick you out because you quit the team," Beth said.

"*You* don't know him like I do," I said. "I'm supposed to be the future starting quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys."

"Just because he wants to use you as a meal ticket doesn't mean you don't have a say in your future," Beth said. "You have a broken leg and your shoulder is messed up. I don't want to sound really negative, but these things are hard to recover from. Who's to say you'll ever be physically the same as you were before. Your dad has to realize that."

"Yeah, you'd think..." I took a sip and swallowed. "My biggest fear when I first started playing football was getting hurt. Like, *seriously* hurt. Surgery scares the hell out of me. I thought my first major one would be from playing. At least I can say that it was worth it. Charles told me about how he tore his ACL as a Sophomore right as he was getting really good and was terrified that he would never be the same. He needed college so bad, man..." I glanced up and realized they were staring at me so I quickly changed my train of thought. "My dad doesn't care. I can either play in the NFL or I can waste away in a ditch while he collects my life insurance payout."

"There's other options for you than just being the quarterback," Ashley said. "You're a good guy. Companies would sell their souls to have you with them."

"I can't work in an office," I said firmly. "I cannot spend my life at a desk."

The thought of being a generic 9-5 guy in his forties with no future left to look forward to scared me more than surgery, bees, heights, cancer. Any of those things can kill you pretty quick. Knowing I have half my life ahead of me and I'm stuck punching numbers into a computer until I'm too old to read the screen anymore was my biggest fear. I'd rather die than be a nobody.

## Beth

I tuned myself out after offering the advice he needed to hear. Ashley took over the conversation while they drank their sugar water. I had nothing left to offer them except a contrarian viewpoint that was not what they wanted to hear, but desperately needed to be said. Ashley played the supportive ex who just wanted the best for the guy she pretended to love and Spencer was stuck in a midlife crisis before he even hit the ripe old age of seventeen.

Three things stuck out to me in that conversation that ended up lasting nearly an hour before Ashley and I decided it was time to go.

1) Spencer fears having a normal life. He went into detail about his one uncle who had a bright future as a professional baseball player back in the 80's that was ruined by a case of a mental illness called "the yips" that he never recovered from. Spencer said he feared developing his own case of the illness after his brush with death that left his body mangled and broken. As I pointed out, he may physically never be the same and he should not expect to be able to perform as he once did. A hard truth, but an honest one.

2) Spencer's little sister returned from a friend's house and spent a solid ten minutes gawking at Ashley before Spencer asked her to give us some privacy. I quickly surmised she viewed her as a surrogate sister figure. They talked about her after she left and Spencer admitted she would, and I quote, "Do anything for me." The idea of her being so desperate to protect her big brother was admirable. As an only child, I do not know this level of familial bond.

3) Spencer and his father have an extremely one-sided abusive relationship. I had suspected some domestic abuse was occurring, but not to the level that was actually happening. Spencer showed us the note his father left for him the day of his crash. Knowing he was in such a fragile state was depressing. It also reaffirmed my position that birth control and legalized abortion should be available to all because some people are simply not meant to be parents.

Ashley was quite grateful for my being there, even if I chose to not say nearly as much as she did. She knew I was not close with Spencer like she was so I played off my "shyness" as nothing more than social anxiety and an inability to deal with heavy issues. She felt the same way to an extent so she understood.

The one thing I did propose was meeting with Spencer, Frank, and other leading members of the football team during the Monday meeting of Student Council. Spencer agreed that this should happen, both to discuss the situation with Brad and to plan out the upcoming Anniversary, but said they should push it back until later in the week to see how O'Reilly reacts and because Spencer wants some privacy during his return to school. I agreed and we decided to make Thursday the date of our big meeting, though we still intended to meet with Frank and Tom to make sure things were okay on their end.

A politician's work is never done.

## Lauren

I was awake all night thinking about Monday morning. Spencer and Ashley were the only thing anyone was talking about since the assembly and they would be back in school together for the first time in weeks. Thankfully Brad wouldn't be around to see it. He was not facing charges yet, but all it would take is one word from Ashley and her Mom and he would be in prison. I just knew it. Fucking creep.

But the real thing that's been keeping me up lately is Beth. I still couldn't shake the thought that she was the one who took those pictures and sent them to everyone. I had no idea how or why she would do it, but I couldn't see how it could be anyone else but her. I loved her so much, but she was scaring me even more.

It hurt to even think about, but she wasn't the girl I fell in love with. We were there for each other when we were both scared and alone. We looked out for each other. I never would have imagined that girl could end up becoming so horrible. If I had known, I never would have asked her out after.

But maybe I was overthinking things. I mean, I had no actual proof she did anything. How could she pull off sending those pictures to everyone? And I knew we are close enough that she would tell me if she saw Brad about to rape Ashley. She came to me about everything. Even if things ended poorly, she knows how much I still love her. If Beth really did love me, she'd respect me enough to let me help her without making a big deal of it

And then there's the issue of Ash herself. Beth has always hated her and treated her like dirt. I know Ash bullied her a lot Sophomore year, but it doesn't mean Beth can't be cruel back. Making fun of her drug problem was really low. Did she really think I was going to leave her for Ash? I would never cheat on her. That's the worst thing anyone could do to someone. I couldn't live with myself if I did that.

We needed to talk. Things were about to get insanely busy with school and student council, but we needed to make time to talk. And if that didn't work... we might need a break to figure things out...

*God, she's gonna hate me...*

## Spencer

Knowing all eyes would be on me, I decided to make an entrance. I was freaking out all weekend over the prospect of coming back. Tom called and said everyone was stoked to see me again, which made things a little easier. But I hate being the center of attention so this was torture for me. Irony because I was the quarterback, I know. This was different, though. I helped take down a guy who had probably hurt girls like Ashley before. I'm not smug enough to seriously call myself a hero, but damn if I'm not proud of myself.

Lauren made things easier for me. She called twice to make sure I was doing okay. It was really sweet that she cared. I really see what Ashley saw in her. She's kind of perfect.

Monday came faster than I would have liked. I just wanted to see some friends again, if I even had any left. So I decided to go in style. I dressed myself up in my outfit from Prom last year, the suit and dress pants still fitting perfectly. If I was coming back to school after a car wreck that should have killed me, I might as well dress up as if it did. Tom and Dwayne swung by my house to give me a ride. I could have taken the bus, but they insisted that they help me get there. Tom's Dad got him a good deal on an older pickup truck that would be able to haul around football equipment. Dwayne took the back seat with the wheelchair and I sat up front.

"Ready to go?" Tom asked as we buckled up.

I exhaled slowly. "Ready."

We showed up to school fifteen minutes before the first bell rang. I suggested this because I didn't want to spend all morning talking to people and then enduring a game of Twenty Questions with the teachers and O'Reilly. Give me a little time to reconnect with people and then let me go about my day. I knew I would still be hounded by everyone with a pulse, but the idea of getting a little break was nice.

When Tom pulled into the parking lot, I could already see eyes on us. I don't know if he told people he would be my ride, but Tom and Dwayne helped me exit the car and the small crowd of onlookers grew and grew. As much as I wanted to walk into school on the crutches, I knew I needed to rest my leg and use the chair. As fun as it is to ride around all day, it really sucks to have people stare everywhere you go. Tom offered to push.

I looked around as I took my seat in the chair, hoping to see Ashley waiting for me. She texted as I was in the shower and said her car got a flat and she would be late. I hoped this wasn't some kind of code that meant she was skipping because of anxiety issues or something. She swore she would be here today so I took her word for it. That scared the shit out of me.

We weren't even through the doorway when people began to run over to me. First it was some Freshmen and Sophomores who probably just wanted to be seen with me. If Tom wasn't pushing the chair, they probably would have ripped my hands off the wheels to give me high-fives and fist bumps. A few cheerleaders came over and kissed me on my still-bruised cheek. It hurt, but they were cute so it was worth it. More underclassmen ran over and said hello as we passed the office. If I hadn't been kinda used to having an entourage before, this would have been so weird. I was a little out of practice, though.

As we drove up toward the gym, the rest of the football team came over to say hello. I hadn't seen most of them since I went to the hospital so it was strange seeing them all together again. Frank stood in the middle, a guilty expression on his face. I shifted around in the chair so I could sit a bit higher.

"Nice suit."

"Thanks."

"You still look like shit, though."

“I felt bad. You’ve always been the short one.”

It took him a second to finally crack a smile. When he did, we bumped fists and he took his place beside me. Tom escorted me and the convoy of probably a hundred people to my locker. If I hadn’t been using the same lock for three years, I honestly think I would have forgotten the combination after so long. Upon opening it, I realized that I was going to need some help actually using it. All of the metal shelves I put inside when the year started were well out of my reach. Tom had to help me put most of my books Lauren had brought me over the course of the last two weeks back.

That was when Ashley cut her way through the crowd to say hello.



## Ashley

Heather and her Mom stopped at my house to give me a ride before going to drop her little sister, Candice, off at middle school. They lived close enough that it wasn't an issue. I couldn't believe on the day where everyone was going to be trying to see me, my car had to get a flat. I don't know if I ran over a nail or glass or what, but I wake up and I'm all ready to get to school early and of course my back right tire is as flat as a pancake.

Mrs. Sinclair and Candice said goodbye to us and we marched to the school with a few minutes before the bell rang. I could tell both of them had seen the pictures because they were being extremely kind to me in the car. They're both nice people, but they were being particularly sweet. I could tell Heather was avoiding talking about anything serious and kept things casual.

"Are you excited for Homecoming?" she asked.

"Yeah. I can't believe it's only a week away."

Homecoming seemed like it was fairly late in the year. The football season only had a couple of games left after Homecoming weekend and then it was playoff time. Not like we were actually going to make it this year. They were playing terribly without Spencer. And now that Brad was gone, the defense just lost their captain and some Freshman was going to be pulling double duty replacing him.

Not that anyone would mourn him, though. Fuck Brad Kendrick.

Everyone was so focused on seeing Spencer since he arrived first that nobody noticed I entered the school. The two girls who stayed behind to talk got the first glimpse of me. This was the second time I made some big return to school so the effect probably wasn't as hard on me. But the circumstances made it a thousand times more gossip-worthy than me running away for a few days.

"Where's Spencer?" I asked the girls. They pointed me in the right direction and followed after me and Heather.

Spencer was getting his stuff from his locker. There had to have been no less than two hundred people crowding together to see him. A few teachers tried to break up the rally, but no one was listening. I wove through the crowd to reach him. It was more difficult than sticking a baseball bat through tied shoelaces. Not that I've ever tried, but it seems difficult. When I finally reached him, everyone held their breath to see what we would do. I knew there was some tension on the prospect of us getting back together. I knew this was obviously never going to happen.

"Hey, Spencer."

"Hey."

"Me and the girls are all having lunch together. Do you and Frank wanna come?"

He nodded his head. "Yeah. Yeah, sure."

## Lauren

O'Reilly dragged me into his office as soon as I got to second period study hall. I was dreading this conversation. Spencer warned me back in the hospital that it was going to come. As President, it was apparently my duty to police the student body. You'd think that the Principal of the school would be the one who takes care of keeping the peace, but now he was asking me to play spy for him.

"As you know, the Anniversary is in one week," he said, clearly annoyed. I wasn't sure if it was directed at just me or the event or what. I wasn't putting up with his bullshit if it was me. "And by some act of God or Satan or whatever other deities may be floating around to piss me off, it also falls on the same day as Homecoming this year..." He sighed.

"The timing is rather amazing."

He glared at me from over the rim of his glasses. "You know this can only mean problems for both of us, right?"

"I'm not on the football team *or* basketball team. Why should I care?"

"Do you really want to say you were the Student Council President during the worst Homecoming at this school since the first Bush was in office?"

"I heard about that one," I said. "Didn't some Senior get caught in the bathroom having sex with three Freshman girls?"

He shuddered. "God, if anything like that happens during my time at this school I may jump in front of a bus... but yes, that is the *official* story. And given how tensions have been around here this year, I can only suspect things are going to be extremely messy." He paused and changed his tone. "Look, you're a good kid so I'm not gonna waste your time with school pride bullshit. God knows I get enough of that during Alumni Dinners and PTA Meetings. Things around here really fucking suck right now. After what happened on Friday, I've got the parents breathing down my neck. The school is hanging on by a thread and I *need this* to go well."

I decided to go on the attack for this because I knew what was coming next. What was he going to do? Expel me? "You know this could all have been avoided if Brad had just been suspended in the first place, right? *Believe all women* or something like that?"

He frowned. "Don't give me that. You know I couldn't just suspend a kid because of some rumors about him. If I suspended every single person accused of trying to have sex with a drunk kid at a party, we would be a Single A school."

"And you expect me to feel sympathy for you for not taking that stuff seriously? What the fuck, man?! Didn't you see the photos?"

"Yes," he mumbled.

"Shit like this is why girls get raped in the first place. Everybody knew he was an asshole. Maybe if you'd done your job and followed up on everything people've been saying—"

"Watch it."

"If he ever comes back, I promise he's as good as dead."

"His father informed me that he will be transferring schools," O'Reilly stated. "Enough about Brad Kendrick. Let's get back to business. I know you're calling the football team aside later in the week to have a chat with them about what's going on with the Anniversary."

"How did you know about that?"

He smirked a little. "You kids think you're so sneaky and clever. You'd be surprised what we hear when you think we aren't listening. So that's why I'm asking you to do me a favor and keep the peace. I

know you're meeting with them because you prefer them to the basketball team. And don't deny it, I know how close some of you girls are with them. What with Frank and Michelle once being a thing, Tom and Casey, Ash and Spencer... Tell me something, is it true you're dating Spencer Barnett now or is that just some silly rumor going around?"

People had been saying it a lot lately, but hearing this sexist asshole ask me caught me off guard a little. "What? No, of course not! Why would you even ask me that?"

He smirked a little wider than before. "No reason. I just wonder if it's because you'd feel bad about dating your ex's former boyfriend?" He sat back in his chair, smiling. "So if you don't want to get expelled for distributing those pictures and inciting a riot, here is *exactly* what you're going to say at this assembly you're planning."

## Spencer

After first period, Frank took up the task of wheeling me around. I was more than capable of getting around by myself, but I think he felt guilty about not coming to see me. We didn't exactly leave each other on the best of terms before the crash. Had the assembly not happened, who knows if he would even speak to me again. The election, the locker room fight, and now Brad getting the shit kicked out of him and being outed as a potential rapist, proving me right. Everything has been a mess this year for us.

I hoped things would get better, especially with the end of the season coming up. I wasn't sure how he'd take the idea of me officially quitting the team, though.

One guy I'm anything but brothers with was approaching me with his posse to say hello. Frank stopped dead in his tracks as soon as they rounded the corner. The rest of the guys formed a line stretching from one end of the hallway to the other as our old friends approached. I felt like we were at O.K. Corral. I wouldn't be shocked if someone here actually pulled out a gun and shot someone. This whole feud was the most stupid thing ever. None of us even knew the fuckin' guy.

Vinny Romano could have been a great football player if he had joined the team three years ago. Apparently he was a natural quarterback in middle school and he was as agile as Charles was when he played. Those two would have been unstoppable last year. Maybe with his leadership, things would have turned out so much differently. Instead, he followed in the footsteps of his older brothers and joined the basketball team. Now he was the Captain for the third year in a row and was being scouted for some big programs. Anybody who is named Captain as a Sophomore deserves it. I didn't even get that.

I've never seen such a smug look on someone's face as his when he had to physically look down at me. It doesn't take a mind reader to know Frank wanted to deck this guy. After the stunt they pulled last year, nothing was off the table, though.

Our groups stood only around ten feet apart. The rest of the hallway was full of people waiting to see if this was the day we finally killed each other.

"Hey, Vinny," I said. With everything going on, I wasn't in the mood for this bullshit.

"Spencer," Vinny said with his deep all-business voice that really suits a generic company executive in a boardroom. "Nice to see you again. You're looking good."

"I did something with my hair." Vinny smiled a little at that. "See you brought the whole team. There a pep rally or something? Basketball doesn't start for a few months, I thought."

"We had a study hall next period, but we wanted to stop by and say hello."

"Hey, listen man, let's just have a normal day and not start anything here." The last thing I wanted was to make a scene. God knows I didn't want to deal with O'Reilly on my first day. "Sound good?"

Vinny looked at me curiously. "I'm not sure what you mean?"

"Don't start that shit, man, you know what he means," Frank warned.

"Or what?" Lonnie grumbled, stepping forward and dwarfing Frank with his 6'8" frame.

Lonnie Dum was the tallest kid in school, obviously, with a gap of a few inches. Apparently he was investigated twice by the athletic board to be sure he was under the age of twenty. I don't know if he had that condition Andre the Giant had that makes him look older as well as being huge, but he did look seventeen-going-on-thirty. On first glance, you'd think the guy would bite your head off. Jokes on him, though, everyone knew he was a massive softie. The fact that he's skinny as a fence post didn't help. But it's hard not to envision him actually crushing you with his size seventeen shoes.

"Guys, guys, no need to fight," Vinny coolly said as he stepped between them. Lonnie instantly backed off. "Spencer, we can talk later. I'm assuming there is going to be some kind of peacekeeping

assembly soon? We can talk there.” He looked at Frank and lowered his voice. “Oh, by the way, I’m really sorry about Michelle. I know you two were close. She was always nice to Tori.”

He gave me a fist bump and led his guys straight through our wall. I felt bad that DeSean was forced to lag behind on account of his leg. He gave me a little nod as he passed me. I may not be in the situation he was, but having someone who understood what I was going through was a nice sentiment.

“Jackass,” Frank muttered.

“Easy,” I warned. “O’Reilly’s watching.”

I’d noticed him out of the corner of my eye when Lonnie stepped up to try to scare Frank. We looked down the hallway together to see he was standing a few doors down, watching us closely. When we made eye contact and he knew we weren’t going to start shit, he turned and walked away.

“What are we gonna do about him?” Frank asked, continuing our march to class.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “We’ll figure something out.” I sighed. “God, I hate that guy.”

“Hot sister, though.”

“Oh, definitely.”

## Kate

I only caught a glimpse of Spencer that day and it was when everyone thought the football and basketball teams were finally going to kill each other. My class was a door down from where Vinny and Spencer had their staredown so I got to watch what would have been the most one-sided fight ever. There were three more football players than there were basketball players and none of the basketball guys looked like they could bench more than two hundred pounds. Except Lonnie, but he's a tank.

I entered French class and found Lauren already there, her face buried in her phone. We didn't have assigned seats so I took the spot beside her. She looked like she was going to be sick. I didn't know if it was because of the almost fight or period stuff or maybe something with Beth. There was only one way to find out so I decided to be a nosy asshole and find out for myself.

"You okay?" I asked. "You looked a little bleh today."

She seemed a bit startled to see me. She must have really been focused on whatever she was doing on her phone to not have even heard me. "Oh. Yeah, I'm... great. Kate. How are you?"

"Well Spencer's back so I'm pretty happy," I admitted. She was clearly not doing well at all so I tried to lighten the mood.

"Oh yeah, that's today..." She looked off into the distance as if she was struggling to remember something. "Huh. I guess I forgot."

"Are you... sure you're alright? Cause you seem a bit—"

"Guys. Problem." Beth rushed into the room and closed the door behind her. "Spencer and Vinny almost got into a fight. Just outside."

"Wait, what?" Lauren asked.

"I saw," I chimed in. "But trust me, it wasn't a fight. They were just kinda... crap, what's that phrase for when two UFC guys look at each other before they actually fight again?"

"Sizing each other up," Beth answered. "Trust me, it could have been a lot worse. Half the football team was there and all the leaders of the basketball team looked like they were out for blood. And the worst part was O'Reilly was watching the whole thing. He looked pissed."

She was exaggerating a bit. There were, like, twelve people total. If a fight broke out, it wasn't exactly going to be like what happened with Brad. They'd shove each other around and then get broken up. And two of them were already crippled. What could they do to each other?

"Fuck O'Reilly," Lauren muttered. "He won't do shit."

"If he won't do anything, we need to hurry up and have this meeting with the basketball team," Beth said. "I was hoping we could move it to our student council meeting on Wednesday instead of Thursday, but Vinny said he and the guys have something going on and can't make it that day. And today is too short notice and I know Spencer wants to be left alone. But it needs to be sooner rather than later. Are you okay with that?"

Lauren made a little hand motion. "Yeah, sure, whatever. Let's just get it over with."

## Beth

*Okay, whatever is going on with Lauren is obviously really bad, but she doesn't need to be a total bitch about the whole thing. I'm trying to help her and she's just blowing me off? What did I do? Why is she being so confrontational right now? Is it because me and Ash are getting closer? Doesn't she want me to be her friend? That's all she cared about a few weeks ago. What changed since then?*

*It doesn't matter. I have bigger issues to deal with. This bullshit with the guys has gone on long enough and now it's pissing off Lauren. I'll do whatever it takes to fix things with her and if I have to, I'll end this war with my bare fucking hands.*

*In the meantime, I need to figure out what is going on with us and why she suddenly is so vocal about hating O'Reilly.*

## Spencer

At lunch, I got the welcome back present Frank had been hinting at since we started talking again before first period.

“You’re gonna love it,” he swore. “Just trust me. You’re gonna *love it*.”

When lunch finally came, I was shaking with anticipation. I could not imagine what great present they were going to bestow on me for my big return to school. After hopping down the stairs and returning to my chair, they stopped me at the center lunch table.

“Shut your eyes,” Frank said.

“I feel like you’re either about to stab me or fuck me,” I said as the world went dark.

“What’s the difference exactly? No peeking.”

I stayed true to my word and didn’t even consider splitting my fingers apart so I could get a glimpse of whatever fate awaited me. I felt someone place something in my lap. It was soft and light. After a few seconds, Frank finally told me to open my eyes again.

It was a pillow with the crown gently resting on top. A reminder of my brief tenure as a lame duck Vice President who couldn’t win the real prize. I wondered what Lauren did with the throne. I liked that chair.

“Ta-da!” Frank gave a little wave of his hands as if it was the greatest gift in the world.

“It’s...”

“The greatest gift you’ve ever received in your life?” Tom asked with one arm wrapped around Casey’s tiny little waist. “I know. I picked it out myself.”

“He really put a lot of effort into it,” Dwayne added.

“Thanks, guys, this is amazing!” I said with sarcastic admiration. “You really are the best friends ever!”

“Oh, and we’re all going over to your house after practice,” Frank said. “Hope you weren’t busy.”

“Wait, we’re having a party... today...?”

“See you at six!” He leaned to hug me and then whispered in my ear. “You should probably know that it was all Lauren’s idea. I think she just wants an excuse to see you.”



## Ashley

We tried to make it be just like the good old days. Me, Spencer, Frank, Casey, Heather. The blinding differences were the seat that Michelle used to sit in beside Frank and the seat beside me that was always reserved for Lauren. Now Spencer occupied that spot and Tom was beside Casey. Things have changed so much over the past year. It's enough to give me whiplash.

The other glaring difference was the number of people that were coming and going to the table to pay their respects to Spencer. So many football players who had doubted him and didn't get the chance to apologize for not believing him when he fought Brad in the locker room showed up to kiss his hand and beg his forgiveness. You'd think he was a mob boss or something. After every person left, he and Frank would laugh under their breaths and wait for the next one to show up. It was an ending stream of bodies.

I wanted to have lunch with my friends and forget about life. How could I when everyone only wanted to talk about the past?

It was around halfway through lunch when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around expecting it to be one of the guys or maybe a teacher. Instead, it was a short girl with big glasses I didn't recognize. She was kinda nerdy looking, but who am I to judge? She introduced herself as Caroline Wright, a Sophomore. I'm sure I heard her name at least once, but she didn't ring a bell. She asked if we could talk together at an empty table and I followed her over, shrugging my shoulders when Casey and Heather looked at me wondering what was going on.

"I just wanted to say I'm really sorry about what happened to you..." she said timidly. She was like a little koala or something. "Not just the assembly, but what happened with... him."

I glanced over her shoulder. It was one of those times I could sense someone was looking at me. Three other girls who weren't exactly the prettiest or most well liked were watching me intently. I looked back down at Caroline. "Oh, yeah, no, it's okay. I mean, nothing happened so it's no big deal."

She could tell I was full of shit and trying to downplay it. "I just wanted to say..." She cleared her throat. Her voice was hoarse like she had been crying. "Do you remember the party after Homecoming last year? At Charles' house?"

How could I forget? I had been drinking a lot and may have blacked out later in the morning, but I could never forget that night. Lauren and I had been dancing so close, I was sure people would figure out we were together. I was so high on life that I didn't care. And then Kara and her friends brought me into the bathroom and changed my life forever. That was when I learned I was going to be Head Cheerleader next year. I had to do whatever it took to earn their respect and show I deserved that spot. Now look at me.

"Yeah, I remember. Why? Were you there?"

She let out a sad little laugh. "I know I don't look like the type who would get invited to one of Charles' parties. I don't even know how I got in. There was a line and the guy who was watching the door waved for me to go in. Next thing I knew, I was dancing with guys like Spencer and Tom and then some guys I didn't know were giving me drinks and I felt like I was going to be sick and... shit, um..." She wiped her eyes. "I can't remember much after that. But I remember waking up and Brad was passed out beside me and we were both naked... and..."

My heart shattered like glass. I didn't have the words. I got off lucky, fucked as that may be too say. He ran off before he could do anything besides take some of my clothes off.

"I guess I just wanted to say..." She struggled to say what she was thinking. "I don't know what I'm trying to say." Another sad laugh.

“Did you tell anyone?” I asked calmly.

“My friends. My Mom.” She shook her head. “What could they do? His dad shut it down as soon as they came to the school about it. Patrick didn’t even bother talking to me after my Mom came in. They just pretended it never happened. I went to the councilor and she said it was *being handled*. I know, real helpful, right?” She glanced around to make sure no one was listening. Then she reached over and gently held my hands I had resting on the table. “Thank you for getting rid of him. You didn’t deserve what happened to you at all and please don’t take this the wrong way, but if something hadn’t happened at the assembly... And just seeing him in the halls every single day? You know, he’d wink at me as he walked by and nobody would bat an eye because he was Brad Kendrick, the star football player. How could he do wrong?” She took another second to collect her thoughts. “I’m just glad he’s gone. And I hope you’re okay. If you ever want to talk about it, me and my friends are here for you.” She blushed a little. “You’re kind of a hero to them for helping me without even realizing it.”

This wasn’t the only time someone approached me over the course of the day. Two Senior girls I had an AP class with last year came up and admitted that Brad was grabbing their asses at Prom and he wouldn’t stop because he was already drunk. And then a Sophomore girl said he was looking at her really creepily during an assembly because she was wearing yoga pants. One Junior guy even came up and said that Brad was trying to hook up with his sister and asked her for nudes even though she was only fourteen.

They all said they were there for me and hoped I was okay. But most of all, they were so happy he was finally gone. They must have thought I had something to do with this. I carefully explained to them all that I had nothing to do with it, but they still looked at me with awe. As if all my issues from this year were washed away.

I’d been trying to block the assembly from my mind as best I could. Seeing what almost happened to me was painful. People would press phones in my face to see if I could confirm Brad was the guy. Whoever sent those pictures has a lot of explaining to do.

I didn’t even know if I was angry at them, though. If they didn’t get it on camera, Brad would still be here. I just wish they had been the one to stop it and not Lauren. Lauren should never have seen that. I didn’t know what to think. It’s all too much.

I do know one thing for sure: I’m no hero. I’m a victim, same as those people who approached me and confided in me. I’m a victim and Brad deserves to burn in Hell for all the pain he’s caused. I just don’t get why everyone suddenly loved me for unintentionally getting Brad suspended.

## Tracy

After the assembly was over, I had a very interesting conversation with Damien.

I was late getting out of the school because I had no desire to go home. Homelife sucks and things were much more interesting at school. People were trying to murder Brad for what he did to Ashley. I thought Frank was going to go to prison for how bad he kicked his ass. How he didn't immediately get expelled, I don't know. Probably because the football team sucked now and they needed all the help they could get. I feel like they feared everyone would riot if he faced any consequences. Also they'd need to suspend half the team and they weren't gonna do that.

Instead of catching the bus, I stuck around to see what would happen. Police were everywhere and some people were being interviewed. One of Damien's little foot soldiers motioned me over to his favorite spot under the tree. He said he liked the shade and hanging out by a tree was much less conspicuous than waiting in his car. God, he was such an asshole.

He was laying down in the grass with his hands behind his head, soaking in the sun, and acting as if nothing had happened. When I stood over him, he happily exhaled and relished the moment. "Rioting, leaked pictures, Brad getting his teeth knocked out," he said with a grin. "What a fun day!"

"Don't say that. Ashley doesn't deserve this."

"Yeah, she's a real angel, isn't she?" He pulled down his sunglasses and stared up at me.

"What do you want, asshole?"

"Just wanted to check up on you. See how you were doing."

I sneered at him. "Spare me."

I turned to leave, but he called out for me to wait. He sat up and leaned against the tree and tapped the ground beside him, expecting me to sit. When I didn't, he rolled his eyes and continued. "I've heard whoever went to the trouble of getting Brad expelled is being called quite the hero around here. People seem to think they're doing the Lord's work for getting rid of Brad the way they did."

"He deserved it," I said. "And yeah, I guess whoever did it is a hero." The look on his face said it all. He knew something I didn't and wanted to rub it in my face. "Oh my God... was it you? Did you take those pictures?"

He laughed. "Nah, I'm not so bold. But..." He reached into his backpack and fumbled around with his stuff. He pulled out a black notebook and held it up for me to see. I reached down for it and he pulled it away at the last moment, smirking. "It'll cost you a kiss."

I ripped the notebook from his scaly little hands. "Fuck off." I frowned as I went from page to page. Why was he showing me this? "I don't get it. It's just phone numbers."

"Whoever wanted to send those pictures out needed to have everyone's phone numbers, right?" I nodded slowly. "Well, I seriously doubt any single person had half the school's cell phone numbers in their contact lists. Not even Spencer is that popular. How did the dweebiast Freshman manage to get a text? Who could have all these numbers?"

"I'm lost, you gotta explain this to me like I'm five," I said, growing agitated.

He slowed down and spoke to me carefully. "Not too long ago, I got a job from someone to gather up as many phone numbers as I could get my hands on. I thought it was stupid and just went along with it, but I made sure to make copies of every number my guys got me. When I gave this person the numbers, they brushed it off like it was nothing. Fast forward to today..."

I saw what he was getting at now. "Who asked for the numbers?"

“I know you’ve been having some problems with a certain member of Student Council lately.” He grinned again. “I’m sure O’Reilly would be *very* interested to learn that she left school before the assembly for a dentist appointment, but never even left the property.”

I barely slept all weekend. I was so conflicted on whether I should tell O’Reilly about what happened. On one hand, Brad deserved what happened to him and Ashley deserves some peace. On the other, Beth doesn’t deserve to be the big hero for nearly letting Ash be raped. I never liked Ashley Williams much after our time together on Student Council, but no one deserves what happened to her. It was a quiet secret that Brad was a scumbag, but nobody would raise a finger against him or face the consequences. The world is better off with him gone.

I finally decided that she deserved to know that Beth was the one who tried to ruin her life. Whether the assembly was meant to help or hurt her, I don’t know. But I came to the conclusion that Ashley deserved to know.

I spent all weekend figuring out how I would play this. If I went forward without evidence, nothing would get done. I had the phone numbers, but Damien said he wouldn’t sell himself and his little black market out. “If I snitch on a customer,” he said, “I’m only hurting myself. Who would trust a snitch after they turn themselves in?”

With Damien being as unreliable as he ever was, I had to come up with a lie that was so fool-proof, nobody could ever doubt I was telling the truth. I didn’t have all the facts, but I had enough to work with. Part of me regretted growing a conscious back with Kate and the pictures I took of Lauren and Beth. It was an evil way to take them down and I was a monster for trying it, but I should have done *something* to keep them from getting as strong as they did. Now I was back at square one. But I was done hiding in fear of that little sociopath.

After two days of no sleep, it finally came to me.

I asked to be excused from my first period study hall to speak with the guidance counselor. I had gone to see her a number of times after one teacher confided in her that she thought I was being abused by my convict parents—a total lie that isn’t true in the slightest—so this was nothing more than a scheduled appointment. I felt dizzy as I made the long march toward the front office. It was my walk of shame. As fucked up as it was, I knew what I had to do. Not just for Ashley, but for myself. This monster had to pay.

My chest tightened as I knocked on O’Reilly’s door. I wasn’t much of an actor, but I rehearsed my lines over and over so much that I could recite them in my dreams. O’Reilly waved me in and motioned to the chair. It was go-time.

“So what brings you here today?” he asked as he continued to write something I couldn’t read. He sounded extremely tired. Defeated.

“It’s about the assembly last week.”

He glanced up at me and I could see the bags under his eyes. He looked like he hadn’t slept at all since Thursday night. I really can’t even blame him. I was in the same boat. “We’re really trying to forget that little incident ever occurred, Tracy.”

“I know who did it.”

Whatever zest for life he had lost over the past seventy-two hours had come back. His eyes absolutely lit up. You’d think I told him I just discovered a unicorn or something. But it was extremely fast. He tried to play it cool and act like this didn’t affect him as much as it did. I knew he was going to milk whatever information he could from me and then throw me away so he could take all the credit. I was okay with this.

“Is that so?”

“Yes. And I have proof.”

I handed him the black notebook and he began to skim through it. Upon realizing what it was, he raised it up closer to his face. He looked at me after reading a few pages. “Is this—”

“The phone numbers of everyone who got a text, yes,” I said, a bit too fast. I reminded myself not to seem so eager to reveal this. It needed to *hurt* that I was snitching on her. Otherwise I’d be suspicious. “There’s a name beside each one so she knew who she was texting.”

“She? She *who*?”

I held my breath. “Lauren Bradshaw.”

He snorted. “Seriously? Come on, be serious.”

“I know it sounds ridiculous, but I know it was her,” I swore. “I have everything you need to get her. A motive, proof, everything.”

“Oh, this should be good,” he said with a chuckle. “Alright. Humor me. Why did she do it?”

“Because she is in love with Ashley Williams.”

That ripped the smile right off of his smug little face. Telling him his grandmother died would have less of an effect. People had been spreading rumors since they became so close last year. Some people even thought it was cute. They’d say how cute of a couple they would make if they came out and gawked over them because they were popular. No one would ever say it to their faces, though.

“I’m sorry?”

“They dated for nearly all of last year. Something happened and they broke up, but she still loves her. She was in the bathroom when Brad tried to hurt Ashley, but she could never take him in a fight. She wanted revenge for not being able to stop it from happening. Even though they broke up, she still loves her. She wasn’t going to let him get away with it.”

“Wait, wait, hold on a second,” he said, shaking his head while processing this information. “You’re telling me that *Ashley Williams* and *Lauren Bradshaw*... dated...”

“I was as shocked as you are,” I said. “Trust me.”

“Okay, wait, even if that is true, how do you know she actually did this? Or got the numbers—”

“She’s insanely popular,” I said. “Wouldn’t she have everyone’s numbers already? And would anyone really think twice if she went around asking for people’s phone numbers? Most people would kill to be her friend. If she asks for someone’s number, she gets it.”

“But what about the parents?” he asked. “Whoever sent the texts had them sent out to over a dozen kids’ parents.”

I shrugged. “Maybe she broke into the cabinet with the emergency contact forms? I only know that she sent the texts and that she asked around for numbers.”

“But how did she manage to send all of the texts to people from different numbers?” he asked, still unconvinced. “Does she have access to a dozen different phones?”

Damien told me about how Beth asked for burner phones during their short-lived “professional relationship.” I’m not sure if that was how she sent out all the texts, but Damien tipped me off on how I could fool O’Reilly. He told me about one of his guys who was planning on dropping out soon and wanted to go down in style. Damien’s words, not mine. Harold Dermott. He said for a couple hundred bucks, he could be convinced to take the fall for this. It’s not like he committed any felonies or anything. He just wants to fuck with the system. Damien’s words, not mine. Say he was put up to it by someone he didn’t know and say he felt extremely guilty. Harold Dermott was a member of the Robotics Club and incredibly smart. Damien figured he could come up with an excuse as to how he sent out all those

messages to people with different numbers. I didn't trust using someone I didn't know as the fall guy, but I had little other choice so I had to take Damien's word for it. Just saying that makes my head hurt.

I told O'Reilly all of this information, save the stuff about Damien.

"Harold Dermott..." O'Reilly said quietly to himself as he quickly scratched it down onto a piece of paper.

"She isn't a bad person," I said with genuine sincerity. "She just wants to protect Ash. She didn't deserve what happened to her."

O'Reilly had nothing else to say except, "I'll look into this. Thank you for your honesty."

And like that, I was one step closer to ruining Beth Hill's life. Lauren didn't deserve to be caught in the middle of all of this, but I knew the story wouldn't work if there wasn't some truth to it and Beth was too smart to frame directly.

Does this make me evil? Yeah, probably. But does this need to happen to bring that little monster down a few pegs? Abso-fucking-lutely.

## Lauren

“So if you don’t want to get expelled for distributing those pictures and inciting a riot, here is exactly what you’re going to say at this assembly you’re planning.”

I don’t get it. We were so careful. How did he know? I thought I was going to have a heart attack. My head was as light as air and the room was spinning. He was going to use this against me and make me do what he wants. I couldn’t believe this was happening to me. This was every nightmare I’ve ever had combined into one.

“I... I didn’t...”

“I know all about the assembly,” he said. “I have the phone numbers, I have Harold Dermott, and I know about you and Ashley. So why don’t we cut the bullshit and discuss how you can right some of these wrongs and make the school a better place.

*Harold... what?*

“But I don’t... I didn’t...”

“At the assembly with the football team, you’re going to tell your little boyfriend to keep his goons in order. No pranks, no fights, no slashing their tires, *nothing*. Then you will meet with Vinny Romano and do the same. If you can manage to keep the teams in order, I’ll forget about your involvement in this little predicament you’ve caused for me.” He stared at me and finally sighed. “I know your heart was in the right place and you had good intentions, but there is a right way and a wrong way to handle something like this and the way you did it is not the right way to handle someone like Brad Kendrick. We were investigating claims of his behavior for some time and I know he was a troubled boy. But this isn’t how you stop someone like him. There are rules, Ms. Bradshaw.”

I was zoned out through the entirety of his rant. I couldn’t care less. I was being framed for something I didn’t do. What kind of monster would do this to me?

“Now please go think about what I said,” he said gently. “I’m looking out for you. We don’t need to involve the police any further if things remain the way they are and you can maintain the peace. People worship you around here. They’ll listen to you if you ask them to be good citizens.” He readjusted himself in his seat. “Otherwise we are going to have quite the issue on our hands that could result in your expulsion. And you can kiss any future volleyball scholarships goodbye if that happens.”

I stared at him with utter horror, my mouth hanging halfway to the floor. That was my future. I needed volleyball to get into USC.

“I’ll see you later this week. And remember what I said. This can all go away with your full cooperation.”

As I left the front office, I realized that O’Reilly was the first adult to learn I was out. That made me sick. That was supposed to be my Dad and it was supposed to be on my own terms. I had no choice here. This was every nightmare I’d ever had about this exact scenario wrapped up into a neat little ball.

But first, I needed to talk to Beth.

## Kate

I didn't get an invite to the party until I was packing up and getting ready to go home. Ash looked like she had just gotten back from a day spa. Whatever happened to her made her glow like those bioluminescent algae. *God, I really am a nerd.*

"You better be riding with me and the girls to Spencer's after the Student Council meeting is over," Ashley happily said. "It's nothing major, just a few of us hanging out and ordering pizza. And you don't have to drink if you don't want. I doubt anyone will be since the guys have football tomorrow."

"Is there going to be a lot of people there?" I asked. I really wasn't feeling like going to another massive party at Spencer's any time soon. It shocked me that Ashley was so excited to go to another one of these given the circumstances.

"No, no," she promised. "Just a few of us. Lauren, Frank. We wanted to make it like the old days when we would all hang out on the weekends." I could tell she was still hurting. Michelle was part of their group for years. I wish I had gotten to know her better. I hope they didn't think I was replacing her or something by suddenly joining them. "So are you in?"

*If you want to make friends, you need to put in the effort.* "Yeah totally!" *Was that too eager?*

"The guys will be over around six." She grinned at me. "In the meantime, you get a lot of quality time with Spencer," she said in a happy little sing-song voice.

I felt myself blush a little. "Yeah, yeah. We'll see what happens."

"No babies, though. I am not ready to be a godmother."

"Who says you would be the godmother?"

She flipped me off as we walked to the student council room. Double bird and everything.



## Lauren

My biggest fear was staring at either of them. Ash was sitting directly across from me and Beth at my right side. If I let either of them know how shitty I felt, they'd do whatever it took to pry into my head and figure out what was wrong. No one else knows me half as well as they do. I love them for that.

I'd been in a daze since I got called into O'Reilly's office. A bad daydream I couldn't wake up from. How could he figure it out? We were so careful. Does he know about me and Beth? Was he really blackmailing me with this? What kind of fucking scumbag does that? As much as I wanted to think this was just an empty threat, I knew he was serious.

After the assembly, he looked like an idiot. The police showed up to keep the peace. Somehow it didn't end up being a big news story. Someone must have told the press to stay away or else. Now I'm supposed to do his job for him because *I* caused the school to look bad and if I don't do exactly what he, the Principal of my school, asks of me, he could tell everyone I'm gay.

Beth took care of leading the meeting today. We decided to alternate days on who would be in charge so neither of us got burned out or if someone was having a bad day, we could get some rest and not deal with leading.

"You doing okay?" she quietly asked as people began to trickle in. "You seem upset."

When she placed her hand on mine underneath the table, I wanted to pull away and run. Instead, I only winced a little and replied with, "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

I'm a horrible actor. There's no way she didn't suspect something was up.

Beth talked about how much money we ended up raising and how well the Bake Sale was received by the parents and faculty. After she was done praising everyone, she turned it over to Ash so she could talk about Homecoming and how that was going. The Homecoming Committee made up of herself as the "Chair," even though she would never call herself that, Victoria, Jasmine, and Natasha Lopez.

*Michelle was in it, but... fuck, it still hurts to think about her.*

I felt terrible for being so hands-off with Homecoming planning this year. Everyone knows Charles, Spencer, and the guys used it as an excuse to joke around. Apparently they almost didn't get things finished before the dance. Thankfully, Ash and the others were more than happy to handle it this year. I'm so lucky to have them.

"We're still looking for spare decorations so if you or your parents see anything you think would look good with our theme, don't hesitate to tell one of us about it and we'll talk about getting it," Ash said to the others. "We're really not being picky here unless it's, like, crazy expensive."

After some more generic ruling was taken care of, we were preparing to break away for the day when I heard myself speak up. "And don't forget about what's this Thursday," I said. "We have a lot to talk about and I really hope we can all be here."

I couldn't stop myself from glancing at either side of the room where Alex and Tom were sitting. Far, far away from each other. They both gave each other uneasy glances before trying to avoid everyone else's eyes. I knew these two wouldn't be the issue. They both seemed like really good guys. Their friends, though...

We broke off the meeting for the day and I finally exhaled for the first time in a half-hour. I felt arms wrap around my waist when everyone else had left the room and almost jumped out of my shoes. I didn't realize Beth was still in the room.

"Ready to go to Spencer's?" she asked.

I almost forgot about this dumb party that wasn't really even a party. We were all supposed to go over to Spencer's house with everyone for a little "welcome back" party. Just like the good old days. Nobody was gonna be drinking. I'd have given anything for an excuse to get blackout drunk and forget how awful the world is for a few hours. Just curl up in a ball with a bottle of vodka or whiskey or wine and cry until I was all out of tears.

"Is everything okay?" she mumbled as she pressed her cheek into my back and nuzzled against my spine. She knew how much I loved that.

"Yeah," I said, a bit more shakily than I would have preferred. "Everything's fine."

She didn't say anything for a minute. She just held me tight and listened to my heart beating. It gave me time to think about what I had to say to her. I only had suspicions, but now that O'Reilly was breathing down my neck, I had to figure this out and decide what to do next and I had to figure it out fast.

"I love you," she finally said.

"I love you, too."

It took me far too long to say it back.

## Spencer

“Are you sure you can’t just go hang out with Candice or... literally anyone?”

Megan shook her head, smiling. “Looks like I get to go to my first highschool party! Or second, I guess. First one I’m being invited to, anyway!”

I pointed at her and said as sternly as possible, “This isn’t a party. We’re all just getting together to celebrate me coming back to school.”

She blinked. “Spencer. That’s a party.”

I waved her off and hobbled over to the couch. “Just...” I sighed. “Okay, you can stay. But we’re not doing any drinking so don’t think you can snag a beer or anything.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t drink beer,” she swore. “It tastes like crap.”

I glared back up at her. “*You’ve* had beer?” I know for a fact our dad wouldn’t let her drink. He lost his shit the time she asked to try some wine he had cracked open. He said alcohol was bad for her and she isn’t allowed to drink in his house.

*Rules for thee but not for me, I guess.*

“Me and Candice snagged one from her fridge when I went over to her house a couple weeks ago,” she said while nervously teetering between one foot and the other. “But we didn’t even finish it. It tasted terrible and I really didn’t like being drunk.”

Poor kid thought she got drunk off half a beer. How cute. “As long as that’s the only thing you’re doing when you go over there,” I warned. “I don’t want you doing anything that gets you killed.” She nodded and promised they didn’t do anything else. That gave me a little hope she wouldn’t end up like our dad. Or me.

He knew I drank when I had people over, but I think it was a silent agreement that I get away with it so long as I’m the quarterback and had the whole school to impress. As long as I was in charge, nothing got broken, nobody died, and it was cleaned up by the time he got home from whatever he was doing, it was okay with him. Now that football was over, I wondered how much longer I would be allowed to invite people over. I still remember the note he had taped to the door. I doubt the disgraced son would get a free pass on having massive parties every weekend now that there was nothing left for him to hold onto. No football, no popularity, no reason.

I shouldn’t say that, though. I was more popular when I got back than I had been since I first came to the school as a Freshman. Everyone wanted a second with me. It was actually kind of annoying to be so loved. All because I was right about an asshole scumbag rapist and someone else kicked the shit out of him for me. I really needed to learn how to fight.

That was an issue for another day. I heard the doorbell ring and Megan answered it before I could even consider getting up.

“Ashley!” Megan squealed as she disappeared outside. I heard her and Ashley making those little shrill shrieks girls make when they see each other for the first time in a long time. It was pretty deafening.

“Ahhhh, Megan!” They reappeared and danced around the foyer, hugging and laughing. “It’s so good to see you!” It felt good to see them doing so well together.

“Do you want to see my science project?” Megan asked.

“Let me get something to drink first,” Ashley said. “It’s so hot outside.”

“Here, come with me,” Megan said as she guided her into the kitchen to make sure she wouldn’t get lost on a trip she had made a hundred times before. It was kind of adorable.

Katherine stepped into the house and looked around nervously. Her friend had just abandoned her for a thirteen year old girl that just blew her eardrums out.

"Hey, Katherine!" I called out from across the house.

When she saw me, she gave a meager wave and took the place in. After exploring the foyer a bit, she entered the living room. "Your house looks very different when the lights are on and there aren't, like, a thousand people dancing around."

"Yeah it is better with the lights off, isn't it?"

It only occurred to me that that was a bit of an in-thing to say as soon as I said it and I had to fight to hide the blush that was creeping up on my cheeks. My whole face gets as red as a tomato when I blush. If she realized what I accidentally said, she didn't show it. Is it wrong to just assume someone is a virgin?

She sat down in a chair across the room and nervously tapped her shoes on the floor. Was she nervous about being alone with me or something? Or was it the cast and sling? Probably both to some extent. I can't remember the last time we ever had a conversation together that was just us. Then again, I did hit my head kinda hard when I crashed.

"So who all is going to be here again?" she asked.

"Well, me, obviously."

"Obviously."

"I guess my sister is gonna be here now?" I strained my ears to see if I could hear what she was saying to Ash, but they must have either moved to another room or were talking very quietly because I couldn't hear anything. "The guys will be here in a couple hours after practice is over. Lauren is driving Beth and Casey and Heather texted and said they'll be here soon. And then you and Ash. Not too many people. I really don't want to do any big parties anytime soon."

She nodded and looked around the room. "I'm kinda glad," she finally said after a little too long of a wait after I finished speaking. "I hate parties." She nervously laughed and brushed some hair from her eyes.

"You get used to them," I said with some reluctance. I remember hating crowds. Then Charles sat me down and explained that I needed to start liking them if I ever wanted to be popular. I hadn't even drank before he and I started hanging out.

Megan dragged Ashley back into the living room. I thought she was going to rip her arm out of the socket. "*Spencerrrrrrrrrr*," she groaned. "What's gonna be for *dinnerrrrrrr*?"

"How should I know?"

"Can we order pizza?" She batted her eyes like she was ten.

"Do you have money?"

"Ashley says you got, like, five hundred bucks for your birthday."

Ashley winked at me. I felt surrounded. My fight or flight kicked in. Unfortunately my leg and arm are busted so I can't fight and I absolutely can't flight. I sighed and pointed at the stairs. "Go get my wallet. It's in the top—"

"Already on it!" She ran off with Ashley, giggling. "Thanks, big brother!" They scurried up the stairs like the little mooching gremlins they are.

"Well... thank you for the free dinner," Katherine said with a half-smile.

"She so owes me for this," I said. "Do you know how much she eats?"

"She's a twig," Katherine said. "How much can she possibly eat?"

"No, no, she's a black hole that sucks up anything edible around here," I complained. "The chicken tenders? Gone. The last slices of my birthday cake? Gone. And don't even get me started on the

pudding cups I got at the hospital. I almost dreaded when she would come over. I might as well have starved to death. It beats watching someone else eat your dinner.”

Katherine seemed to lighten up after I finished the little speech I had been writing in my head for years now about my human garbage disposal baby sister. It was nice to get my mock complaints out of my head and have someone actually listen to me. I was pissed about her eating the cake, though. I spent good money on that.

The front door opened and the rest of the girls entered one by one, talking way too loud for my headache to bear. My eyes may have lingered on Lauren a bit too long as she entered the room. Can anyone with a pulse blame me, though?

## Ashley

“You know we’re all going to pay for the pizza, right? Like we’re not going to force your brother to pay for food for nine people?”

Megan laughed as she took his wallet. “Well, duh. But that doesn’t mean we can’t mess with him a little, right?”

I heard the front door creak open downstairs. Casey and Heather called out to announce their arrival, their footsteps echoing through the hallway. I checked my phone to see if Lauren or Beth had texted me. There was nothing so I just figured they were running late.

Megan led me back downstairs. She was being very clingy. I didn’t mind. I wondered if she was just nervous to be hanging out with so many high schoolers. She was home for some of Spencer’s parties— either by total accident or because nobody told her to go away for the night— but she never stuck around for long or so much as interacted with anyone she didn’t know. It was nice to see her again, though. She really was the little sister I never had and secretly always wanted.

I guess Lauren and Beth arrived with the girls because they were all sitting around the room together. As we walked in the doorway, I saw Spencer. Even though he physically looked like shit, he never looked happier before in his life. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to understand why he was so excited. Lauren was wearing a tank top that complimented her chest extremely well and black jeans so tight she would need garden shears to get them off of her. Even I stopped and admired her for a moment while nobody was looking. Can anyone blame me?

It was painfully obvious that Spencer wanted to fuck Lauren’s brains out. And Beth was sitting right there in total silence. There was no way she couldn’t have realized.

## Lauren

Even though he puts on a bit of a tough guy act around the guys, Spencer really is a nice guy when he isn't surrounded by all of his guy friends. I've known him for a while now and I watched him go from the sweet, shy kid with a couple of good friends to a local deity because he could throw a football really well. With that ability came some level of smugness and entitlement that he was only just growing out of. The circumstances of what made him act nicer again were horrible and I wished the crash never happened, but I was so glad he was finally coming back around to who he used to be. I always liked him when he was down to earth.

Frank took Tom and the girls outside to mess around with a football he brought from practice. I had elected to stay inside because I really wasn't in the mood to get all sweaty.

"I can stay in here, too, if you want," Beth suggested.

I instantly tensed up inside. "Yeah. I mean, if you want to, it's cool," I replied, kind of passive-aggressively and kind of quietly pleading that she be anywhere else but here.

I think Beth took the hint because she slowly retreated to the backyard. Guilt flowed through my veins when she gave me one last look that screamed *Why do you hate me?* in big bold capital letters. I really didn't know what I was doing. Was this intentional? Was I subconsciously trying to hurt her? I thought I would feel shitty for the rest of the party because of that one look alone. Even though she may have done something horrible, she was still my girlfriend and I still loved her.

"Thanks for staying with me," Spencer said. "I really don't want to watch them play football right now."

"Are you really done with football?"

He gently nodded his head. "After everything that happened? Fuck it. And even if I make a full recovery, who knows if I'll ever be good again? And I'd rather do something with my life than just football."

We ended up talking about the future for the next twenty minutes. It wasn't a topic I normally went into with people, but Spencer was so easy to talk to that words just kinda flowed out of my mouth and I wasn't afraid to talk about it like I normally was. And the best part was I knew neither of us were judging each other. It was such a contrast to when Beth would talk about the plans she had for "us" and reading off what she wanted to do with our lives like it was some kind of a checklist. She can be so suffocating, but I know she loves me.

Something I've noticed about most guys is they tend to be massive assholes when they have their friends around. I guess they think being dickheads is cool or something. But when they're alone with a girl, they tend to calm right down. Even the remotest chance of getting laid is enough to make even the most manly guy on the planet humble himself and show off his emotional side. Except for the assholes who think they're entitled to sex and view women as walking fleshlights. Fuck them straight to Hell.

It was growing painfully obvious that Spencer wanted to get with me and honestly if we were back in Freshman year or even eighth grade, I would have said yes without hesitation. I remember when I was going through my phase of being attracted to anything with a pulse that showed interest in me, I had such a big crush on Spencer. Like the kind where you have a page of your notebook dedicated to your initials together in big stylized hearts with arrows through them. I made sure to burn the evidence as soon as I realized how absolutely cringe-inducing it was.

I only started to get "hot" when I was in eighth grade. Before that, I was pimply and kinda chubby. Loose-fitting clothes, braces, a bra that didn't fit right. I was a mess and I admit it. Guys in our

grade only started to notice me when I took up volleyball, lost some weight, and my boobs magically got bigger over the summer between seventh and eighth grade.

Sometimes I miss how easy it was back then. Before I had to worry about anything with a pulse only caring about me because they wanted to fuck me.

Before that, I was a nobody. Not even the shy little dork that was Spencer Barnett would date me. It's for the best. I didn't want to mess up our friend group. All I had was my Dad's money, but I would *never* use that to make friends or get a boyfriend or girlfriend. Spencer was a childhood crush that just kinda teetered out as I explored my growing attraction to girls.

I never had the balls to show blatant interest in another girl during grade school or Freshman year. It still shocks me that I managed to go out with Ashley at all. I never would have imagined in a thousand years that we were alike in that way until the day we actually kissed for the first time. Growing up, she was just kinda the popular girl that every school had. She "dated" boys even back in fourth grade because she wanted to seem mature, but they never went anywhere. Apparently, somehow, I was her first kiss despite all of these playground boyfriends and "End of the School Year Carnival" cotton candy dates. I still smile when I think about that day. She was so sweet.

If we were still Freshmen, I would have jumped with joy for him showing this level of interest. But now?

Frank ran over with the football and waved at us. "Why don't you two lovebirds join us?"



## Spencer

I wanted to throw him off the roof. We spend all this time talking and really connecting on a personal level and he runs over and ruins it for me. The word part was he didn't even know what was really going on so he doesn't know how much of a moron he was just for saying that.

I played it cool and pretended we were just joking around like normal. "Nah, man, I'm just gonna stay in here."

He was undeterred. "At least stick your feet in the pool or something?"

If Lauren didn't smile and speak up, I'd have shot him a death stare. "I'll go out if you do," she offered. Reluctantly, I followed her out and dipped my good leg in the shallow end of the pool. It felt so cool. She took off her shoes and socks and did the same, splashing water up my leg with her feet. Ass.

The sun was beating down on me. I guess a few weeks stuck inside really didn't help me stay acclimated to the heat. It was already October. At least it was supposed to cool off soon. Right? Fuck global warming.

While I cooked alive, we watched a truly NFL-quality game of touch football going on across my backyard. The girls played on one team and Frank and Tom played on the other. Beth was sitting under a tree on the far side of the yard, quietly watching the game. It took me a second to realize Megan was on the guys' team as well. I guess they needed a third player and either she or they thought she was as good as her big brother.

*Ha. She wishes.*

Megan ran over to me with the ball, huffing and puffing. "Why d-do I have to do this exactly?"

"You wanted to party with the big kids, right?" I playfully reminded her.

"Nobody said any...anything about playing fo...football." Sweat glistened her forehead.

"If you want to play ball with the big kids, you gotta earn your place," Frank called out.

"You're gonna earn a kick to the leg if you keep acting like a dick!" Megan yelled. He was howling with laughter. Megan then gave him the finger, which only made him and Tom laugh louder.

Being the varsity athlete and protective big brother I was, I snatched the ball from Megan's hand and fired it with all of my might at Frank's big dumb head with the intention of taking it off his shoulders. Unfortunately, I had a few factors working against me. For one, Frank saw my shot coming from a mile away. Second the wind was blowing rather strongly and it threw off the trajectory of my throw. And third and most importantly, I was throwing with my left arm, which is most certainly not my dominant arm, and my throw resembled more of a six year old's attempt at throwing a baseball to their father. Like the six year old doing their best imitation of Roberto Clemente, the ball wobbled through the air and landed ten feet in front of him, bouncing harmlessly through the grass.

Frank watched it roll through the freshly cut grass until it came to a complete stop. "Nice throw, Unitas!"

Now it was my turn to give him the finger. He's lucky I didn't shove it up his dickhole.

"If you want, I can hoof him in the balls when he isn't looking?" Lauren offered.

"I can live with that. But wait until he's in the living room or in the driveway," I said. "I'll be waiting in my wheelchair so when you get him and he's hopping around crying, I can run over his feet."

Lauren laughed, the sunlight gleaming in her bright yellow hair. "I think we can do that."

During the football season, we had a term for the guys who got hurt and couldn't play. "Cripple Corner." Nobody wanted to end up being in Cripple Corner. At best, we only had four or five guys who weren't allowed to practice because of injuries. When we were dealing with the injury bug that ended up

taking us out of the playoffs in the first round last year, we were out thirteen of our fifty guys. A lot of people ended up pulling double duty and playing offense and defense. If I wasn't the quarterback, I'd probably have been thrown in there at some point. It's what hurt us arguably as badly as Charles leaving the team. We were just too tired and beat up by the end of the season to be good enough to win.

Now I'm the Captain of Cripple Corner and I'm not even on the team anymore.

Being around Lauren made things better, though. She had no interest in playing so we spent the whole time just talking about anything to kill some time. Every word she spoke only made me want her more. She was sitting so close to me, I could feel the heat from her body against mine.

*If the others weren't here...*

I got the cooling off I desperately needed when a stream of cold water hit me in the face. I pursed my lips to keep the water out of my mouth and turned my head away. Lauren was laughing and she was quickly joined by the others.

"WAIT! STOP!" I cried. "I CAN'T GET THE CAST WET! PLEASE!"

Frank stopped spraying me with the hose just long enough for me to wipe my eyes. "What's that? You wanna get wet? Okay, if you insist..." He held down the trigger and I got hit with even more water. My attempts to bat the water away like a pathetic cat were in vain.

"I hate you so much!" I yelled. I finally got some relief when the water stopped spraying. When I opened my eyes again, I checked to see if Frank was just messing with me again. He looked unhappy.

"Boooooo! You're no fun!" he moaned at Beth, who was standing by my house's wall. She was bent over, locking the nozzle so no water would come out. She was like my guardian angel. I prayed my casts weren't totally soaked. I touched them and they felt dry enough.

Beth shrugged and went back to her spot under the tree, never saying a word.

I spit some water out of my mouth. "Is it over?" I asked.

Frank walked over and dropped the garden hose at my feet. "Yeah, it is. Your girlfriend's little buddy turned the hose off. She's no fun."

"We're not dating," Lauren and I objected together. We looked at each other and opened our mouths to speak, but ended up just cutting each other off when we apologized.

Frank made a little kissy face. "Aww, how cute. Can I be the flower girl at the wedding?"

Megan ended up saving me this time when she smacked Frank upside the head with her flip flop. Frank recoiled and stumbled away. "Leave them alone! You're such a jerk!" Megan yelled as she continued to beat him down. "You big, stupid jackass! Stop running!" He tried to get her to stop, but she kept mercilessly beating the shit out of him until he was apologizing profusely to me through laughter so hard he could barely get the words out. Being the good friend I am, I forgave him.

## Lauren

They totally saw me blushing when Frank suggested that me and Spence were dating. God, he's such an ass. Why couldn't he just leave us alone and go annoy someone else? It's not like there was a shortage of people. And what's worse is I could totally feel Beth's eyes drilling a hole into me from her spot under the tree. She didn't even say why she wanted to sit alone. She just broke off and found a spot in the shade.

We all crowded around the patio after the pizza showed up to eat and talk. Ashley talked about Homecoming, which had basically become her baby since the assembly. I think she was just trying to keep herself busy. If that's what it took to make things better for her then I was all for it.

"We got a DJ that actually works local clubs," she said between bites of pepperoni. "And some Sophomores who are in a band are gonna play a song or two."

"Ew. Why?" Frank asked.

"Because the drummer's dad is a big donor to the school and we need his money for the musical," Ashley admitted. "It was Victoria's idea. She basically runs the drama department."

"What about food?" Spencer asked.

"Aren't we all going to dinner before the dance?" I asked. He shrugged. "Oh, come on, you know we're all hanging out together, right?"

"Of course we do. We need to spend *some* time with Tommy before he runs off with little Casey there," Frank said to his old friend with a wink. Tom wrapped his arm around Casey and they started making out to spite us. We all groaned and threw mushrooms, pepperoni, and dipping sauce packets at them. They splattered on the ground after hitting them in the hair and arms and faces, except for one mushroom slice that got stuck in Casey's hair. She gasped and ran to clean herself off.

"You're all cleaning up, you know," I said. Nobody responded.

Ashley licked her fingers and continued on. "So there will be *some* snacks, but nothing too fancy. We aren't made of money here."

"What about... *refreshments*?" Frank asked with a grin.

"No," Ashley ordered. "No, no, *no*, absolutely *no drinking* at Homecoming. Me, Victoria, Jasmine, and Natasha had to sit down with O'Reilly and he made it very clear that we're on thin ice with people drinking at Homecoming."

"You guys really ruined things for us at Prom last year," I said to Spencer and Frank. Mostly Spencer. He smiled a little as he reminisced about his little act of debauchery.

"Oh please," Frank scoffed. "That was last year. Can't they just forgive and forget?"

"They're still really pissed about Prom, Frank," Heather said. He just waved her off.

"It'll be fun," Beth promised. "Even without spiked punch bowls."

Everyone seemed taken aback that she actually chose to speak. It was like everyone forgot that she was ever actually sitting there. To be completely honest, I did for a little bit, too. She hadn't spoken more than two words since we got here. After she finally did say something, the energy seemed to die a little. Have you ever had that one person in a group setting that can disrupt the dynamic and send everyone into a nosedive in terms of engagement with the people sitting around them? In that case, that was Beth.

*Am I a bad person for thinking that?*

Feeling guilty for leaving her hanging for the fiftieth time in the span of a couple hours, I excused myself to go use the bathroom. It felt so nice to get out of the sun and into the AC. Part of me didn't want

to go back outside at all. Just sit inside and freeze to the couch cushions while the TV lulled me to sleep. Nobody around to bother me, no one to make me feel upset. That simple fantasy was a paradise inside my mind.

After I did my business, I wandered into the kitchen to grab some ice water. Coke is nice, but nothing beats some water so cold that it makes your breath steam during a scorching mid-October day. I was just about to leave the kitchen when I saw her standing in the doorway of the kitchen. She scared the shit out of me to the point that I nearly dropped my glass. I hadn't heard her come in.

"I'm sorry," Beth quickly said, her eyes full of regret when she realized how bad she startled me. "I thought you heard me come in."

It took me a second to catch my breath. I didn't want her to know how freaked out I was. "No, it's my fault." It just kinda slipped out. What was my fault? Being scared?

"How is it your fault?" she asked. "I was the one who scared you."

"It's... nevermind, it's okay."

"What's going on? Why are you avoiding me?"

My mind began racing. It might not have been the perfect setting to do this, but I knew it was time for *the talk* that I had been dreading having with her. It was going to happen eventually, but I still wasn't ready. Regardless, it had to happen. But I also didn't want to hurt her...

She took a few hesitant steps forward. "What's wrong? You look sad." When I didn't respond, she took the initiative. "I don't know what's going on but I wanna help so let's just get out of here and go back to my place and—"

"We need to talk."

Those four words made Beth stop dead in her tracks. Watching her heart break in real time hurt me as much as it did her. I tried to convince myself that I was overreacting. I didn't have any proof she even did anything. It was just some ideas I had floating in my head. Every justification for why I was thinking she was a bad person spun in my brain, trying to convince me to go through with it. I was angry. I needed someone to blame. I wanted to help Ash. Seeing her trying to force herself to not break down killed me inside.

"What's going on?" she quietly asked.

In a perfect world, I'd have hours to explain to her why I was hurting and this relationship was slowly beginning to crumble. But I only had milliseconds to think up a reason not to. By the time I could have had second thoughts, the words began to escape from my lips.

"I think we should break up."

Bethany Hill is the strongest person I have ever met in my life. If it's all fake and she's really broken inside like the rest of us or she has absolutely no sense of fear, I don't know. As I looked at her, I could see she was trying not to show she was afraid. I'd never seen her afraid before. Like, genuinely mortified. It made me shiver to know I could make her so scared.

All she could mutter was a simple word. "What?"

"I've been doing a lot of... um... thinking and I just think it's best if we... took some time apart." Not as clean as I had rehearsed it in my head, but that might be better. If I said it like I was reciting a line in a play, it would seem way too inconsiderate. I had to force myself not to give the generic *It's not you, it's me!* bullshit followup. I just had to be patient.

I didn't need to be patient for long. She wasted no time responding. "But... why?"

Now was the part where I had to word vomit up an excuse. I couldn't let her know I was onto her. "I just don't think I love you anymore... I'm sorry, I know this isn't fair to you at all. But lately I've been

thinking a lot about me and us and I just feel like..." I ran out of words. My brain went blank. It was the worst case of stage fright I'd ever had in my life.

Beth took a step toward me. "What can I do?"

"Beth..."

She started speaking words that went a hundred miles per hour. "Lauren, you know I love you so, so much! No matter what happens, you know how much I love you and I would literally die for you and-and whatever it takes to fix things, I will do anything and I... *please*, just tell me what I can do and I'll do it, just don't... do this. Please..."

"I'm sorry. But there's nothing you can do. It's not you, I swear. It's my fault."

*It's my fault for enabling this. For letting you do these crazy, extreme things and acting like it was okay. For letting you be a bully. For letting you become so pushy and aggressive.*

"What is?" she said, her body beginning to shake. "What's your fault? What can we do? We can fix this, Lauren! It's not too late! We-we-we can forget this ever happened and figure this out *together*!"

Something in me snapped. Everything was too overwhelming and I heard myself say, "I know what happened with the assembly."

She stopped shaking and her mouth hung open a little. I could tell she was choosing her words very carefully as we stared at each other. It was like watching her become a different person. The version of her I hated. It was just like *Breaking Bad*.

"What are you talking about?"

"Please don't lie to me."

"I didn't say anything. How could I be lying? I don't know what you're talking about."

"The assembly," I repeated. "Someone sent the pictures of Ashley and Brad to everyone. I really don't want to think that it was you because I know you're a good person, but—"

Her eyes went wide. "You think *I* did that? You think I sent those pictures? Lauren, how could I possibly do that? I can show you my phone right now, there's no pictures of those two on there. Shit, I can show you my phone records if that's what it takes. And why would I do that? If I had those pictures, don't you think I would tell you? Or Ashley? Or just go to the police? And how could I possibly send those texts to everyone? I'm one person! I mean, seriously, even if I did have those pictures, how could I possibly send them to everyone in school? How could I send them to their *parents*? Lauren, why would I lie to you about this? I wanted to help Ash as much as anyone, but why would I do something so crazy as sending out those pictures? How could you possibly accuse me of doing something this evil?"

The more she talked, the more she made sense. I had no reason to suspect her, except for her not being at the assembly. She could have just said that she was having an anxiety attack and I'd have believed her a thousand percent. But it wasn't her talking that made me realize I needed to end this. It was how she was saying it. She sounded so annoyed about the whole thing. I was wasting her time with such a silly issue. How sad *she was* that her girlfriend would accuse her of such a crazy thing.

When she finally stopped talking, I gathered my courage and finally said it. "Just tell me one thing... why weren't you at the assembly that day?"

"I had to go to the dentist. I told you that already."

"But why didn't you tell me about it earlier that day?" I asked. "I was panicking through the whole thing because you weren't there."

She shrugged. "I only heard about it during third period and my phone was dead. I didn't have time to find you and work something out. I'm really sorry."

Any doubts I still had in my mind were gone now. I know Beth. She micromanages everything she can. Why wouldn't she just borrow someone's phone and leave me a message, at the absolute very least. "Beth... come on..."

"What do you want me to say?" she asked. "I'm sorry I had to hurry out of school to get my teeth scraped?" She lowered her voice. "Lauren, I love you and I would never lie to you. I know you're angry and things seem weird, but I didn't do anything wrong. Can we please just go back to your house and talk things over where no one can hear us?"

I shook my head. This had to end. "You're an amazing girl, Beth. But there's too much going on right now... and I don't know if I can do this anymore..."

Her confidence died and she was back to the terrified girl she was before I accused her. "No..."

"I know this is a lot to take in, but I hope we can be friends again one day." I started to back away. She tried to follow me, but I turned and hurried off. "I'm sorry."

I sprinted through the house and locked myself in the bathroom. I didn't have anywhere else to go. She tried knocking on the door a few times and I think I heard her start to cry. After a few minutes, everything was silent. I pressed my ear against the door and heard nothing. Beth was gone. My legs turned to stone. All I could do was stand there and begin to cry.

When Ashley turned the corner, she looked at me, concerned and confused. "Lauren?"

I shook my head. "Can we talk? Something just happened... with..." I broke down. The next thing I knew, Ashley's arms were wrapped around me and we retreated back into the bathroom. We wouldn't come back out for another half-hour. The only reason we left was because I wanted to cry at home and not let everyone else know I was upset. Ashley came home with me and we spent the rest of the day crying and talking. Just like the old days.

For better or worse, I didn't say a thing about what Beth did.

## Spencer

It was kinda disappointing to know Lauren had to run off. I was really hoping to talk with her more. It was weird, though, cause Ashley told me she was taking her home and then after they left, I realized Beth was gone, too. I still didn't know if they're friends or whatever, but I figured they were if they're leaving parties together and stuff. She did try to help Ashley out when she was going through her manic period before the crash so I thought she was pretty cool.

"She's fuckin' weird, man," Frank said as we ate pizza by the pool. "*Waaaaay* too serious and she has this look that screams *I'm gonna cut you* whenever she looks at you." He shook his head. "Terrible personality, but God what a great ass."

"Just how you like 'em, huh?"

He smiled and took another bite

Things seemed a lot less tense without Beth watching us the whole time. It was like she was waiting for us to do something wrong so she could call the cops on us or something. I don't know. I hate sounding judgmental and stuff. I'm grateful for what she did before. I just wish she would let her hair down and enjoy life. Just relax a little.

Casey and Heather were chatting with Tom in the grass. We would spend a little more time together before they had to go home. The girls told me they would hang out with me at lunch and Tom said he'd see me tomorrow. Frank hung around a bit longer to annoy Megan, but he had to leave eventually, too. I knew this would be the last time we all got to hang out for a little while so it stung to be alone again.

After the others had left, Megan and I had a heart to heart. I didn't expect to discuss girls and life in general with my thirteen year old sister.

"Do you like her?" she asked me point-blank. "That Lauren girl, I mean. I saw you watching her, like, the whole time she was here."

"Well, shit, you're making me sound like a stalker here."

She flashed a big shit-eating grin that exposed her braces. "You know she was watching you, too, right?"

"Oh, come on," I said, trying not to blush.

"Don't pretend you didn't notice. You know she was basically drooling over you the whole time, right? You're an idiot, but I know even you can see she's into you."

"Gee. Thanks." I smiled and shook my head. "Well even if she *did* like me, she's dating..." I caught myself, not wanting to out her and Beth. I knew Megan would literally not care, given her full support for Ashley, but it would still be a scummy thing to do. I wasn't even sure if Ash ever told her that she dated Lauren or not. It's so hard to keep straight who knows and who doesn't. "She's dating someone right now and I'm not the kinda guy who chases after someone who's taken."

"How noble. Do you like her?"

"Yes." It felt so good to finally say it, even if it was only to my baby sister.

"Do you know who Lauren is dating?" I nodded. She went on. "Are you worried that Lauren thinks they're hotter than you?"

I laughed. "Megan, stop, please. If she becomes single, I promise you I'll ask her out. But I don't think that is going to happen for a *very* long time. From what Ashley has told me about their relationship, it seems like it will never end. They're made for each other."

## Ashley

When she told me that they were broken up, possibly for good, I knew right then and there that I really was a good person. If I was a narcissist who just wanted to make myself feel good, I probably could have hooked up with her. She was so sad and lonely, I'd spent so much time learning just what to say to make her desire me. For a brief second, I thought we actually would do something...

And then I realized how sick I was for even thinking about that.

Even though I still loved her with every fiber of my being, it would easily be the worst thing I have ever done if I tried to get in her pants. Like, the worst thing by miles. I'm not the kind of monster that would take advantage of her when she's scared and vulnerable. I don't think it would be technically be considered rape, but I would feel like I raped her. Is it possible to emotionally rape someone? I wasn't going to find out.

I say this because I am still extremely conflicted about what happened two days later. On one hand, I am very happy they found happiness with each other. On the other, they were both in terrible places and had no business being with each other at that time when they should have been working on themselves. In a few weeks, months, maybe even a year? Sure, go for it. I loved them both and they loved me and I'd support them until the day I die. But two days after she broke up with her ex-girlfriend?

It either makes me out to be an angel or a pretentious douchebag to say I'd have been able to wait a few months before making a move on her. Still happy for them and will be supportive of them nonetheless, though.



## Spencer

After the party, I went into a rut. A bad one. Not bad enough to make me swerve off the road and into the largest tree I could find, but a pretty rough one.

I spent all night thinking about Lauren and it made me hate myself. I made it a personal rule to never chase after someone who was taken, but I just couldn't get her out of my head. She's easily the hottest girl in school, which of course made me notice her, but she's also sweet and really easy to talk to and extremely caring and considerate. Beth was the luckiest girl in the world to have her as a girlfriend. I don't even think she realized how lucky she was to be with someone like that. And here I was staring at the ceiling with nothing but the glow of an alarm clock halfway across the room to illuminate the little bumps on the drywall as I imagined my life if I had the chance to be with her.

The next morning, after getting very little sleep, I got word from Frank that Coach wanted to talk to me sometime that day. Even though I had no intention of explaining what happened before the crash, I knew I needed to face the music eventually. So during study hall, I went to meet with him. He was in earlier than normal to prepare for practice and had the door open when I showed up.

"Hey, Coach," I said as I balanced on the crutches. I figured it would be best to leave the chair in the weight room that connected to his office. "You wanted to see me?"

He glanced up from whatever scouting report he was reading and his eyes lit up from behind his big glasses we all made fun of behind his back. "Spencer."

"Mind if I come in?"

"Yeah, of course, come in, come in." He waved me inside and I hobbled to the chair across from him. I leaned the crutches against the filing cabinet behind me. "How's the leg?"

"Still hurts," I admitted. I felt a little ache from inside the cast. Whenever I thought about it, it flared up a bit. Psychological thing, I figured.

"Do you need a wheelchair?" he asked. I could tell he was dreading my answer. When I nodded, he slowly exhaled and shook his head. "Can you walk at all? Without those?"

I glanced back at the crutches he was nodding to. "A little. Not for long, though. It'll be a long time before I can walk on my own. I'm not even thinking about physical therapy right now. Doctors said it's gonna be rough."

I'm not going to lie and pretend I didn't resent him to some extent. Even if he didn't know what kind of a monster Brad was, he still took his side and kicked me off the team without a second thought. Not that I even cared anymore, part of me was thinking of quitting, but it was the way things went down that stung the most. Because of that, I made sure to play up how much I hurt and how much the future scared me. Just to give him a little taste of guilt.

I guess it worked because he looked so full of grief and remorse. "Hey, look, I just wanted to... apologize for what happened before. In the locker room and then here when we... I..." He cleared his throat. "The whole thing with Brad, me being angry with you. I apologize. I know I did before, but I am sorry."

"It's okay. I forgive you."

"You're a good kid, Spencer," he said with a sad smile. "It's okay to hate me over what happened, you know."

"Why would I hate you?" I asked. I was angry, but not enough to actually hate him. "You didn't know how terrible Brad was."

He closed his eyes and angrily shook his head. "When I got those pictures, I didn't know what to think. I thought it was some sick joke some of the kids did that got back to me. Then I heard about the assembly and his Dad pulling him out of school..." When he opened his eyes, I saw him get more angry than I had ever seen him before and he's a Texas high school football coach. "Between you and me, I hope that little shit rots in Hell for what he did. And Frank and the others aren't gonna get punished. If O'Reilly or anybody else tries to throw the book at them, I'll tear this place down brick by brick."

I couldn't help but smile a little. When I did, he seemed to lighten up a bit. It's amazing how much a mutual disdain for someone can bring you together.

We didn't talk much after that. He said that he would do whatever he could to help me out with PT and even recommended some doctors and therapists to consider. After that, we shook hands and went our separate ways when the bell rang and I had to get to my next class. I was expecting the talk to last much longer. Even though he could be an extremely intense guy, Coach really made me feel better. Give it some time and I might even forgive him. I still believe I had the right to be pissed off, though, and I think he understood that.

On the way to class, I ran into some of the basketball players. Vinny's little cronies loved to wander in packs, running into people as they went and causing a general annoyance to anyone they encountered. Today, I was the target. What could I do in response? Swing my crutch at them? They saw a weak guy they already hated and went in for the kill.

"Well, look who it is," DeSean said as he stood in my way. "Hey Spence. Vinny's real excited for the meeting."

"We all are," Lonnie said with his patented smarmy grin.

"I'm looking forward to it, too," I said, realizing that people were stopping to watch. It was humiliating. "Could I get through? I have to get to class."

"Fourth period..." DeSean said, deep in thought. "You have Algebra out in the annex, right? With Alex?" He looked to Alex Weatherspoon for support and received a small nod. Ash said Alex was a bit of a pushover at Student Council meetings. He was clearly just the tag-along with no say in what the rest of them do. "Gonna be pretty hard to drive out there, huh?"

"Why don't you just stand up and walk there?" Lonnie said.

My grip tightened around the wheels of my chair. I had never been more humiliated in my entire life. A month ago, I'd have battered these dweebs. At that moment, I realized I'm nothing. "Come on. Move."

Before I could make a very insensitive comment at DeSean's expense, I heard someone yell at the guys. "Hey, knock it off!" Lauren stepped out from the crowd. "What's going on here? Don't you have somewhere to be?"

DeSean shook his head and the guys wandered off. I distinctly remember one muttering *What a bitch* under their breath as they left, drawing some laughs from the others. That made me want to rip their heads off more than anything they had said that was directed at me. Don't talk shit about a girl around me if you don't want me to break your fucking kneecaps.

Lauren knelt down beside me. "Are you okay? They were being real dickheads."

Even though I was humiliated, I was grateful for her help. But with a hundred people watching us, I needed to act like the tough guy to maintain some level of respect. "Can we talk later? I need to get to class." I just hoped she didn't take that in a bad way. I did want to talk later, but I needed to get away from everyone. Far, far away.

In the end, though, I couldn't bring myself to meet up with her. It might have been embarrassment, it might have been me trying to be all macho and tough. Whatever it was, I told her something came up and I couldn't meet up after school was over.

Looking back with the power of hindsight, I regret ever leaving the school.

When my dad came home, he was pretty fucked up. He'd been at the casino since before lunch and had probably been drinking since breakfast. To this day, I don't understand the appeal of drinking during the day. I party, sure, but not for sixteen hours straight by myself. I could tell he was wasted from how he entered the house. Normally he just walks in and goes about his day. When he drinks, he makes sure everyone knows he is there. It's probably for the best because it lets us know that he is going to be the worst human being alive and acts as a warning system to stay the fuck away from him.

But I was stuck on the couch so I couldn't slip away and find somewhere to hide until he passed out. He put his hand on my bad shoulder and gave it a hard squeeze. He was laughing his ass off.

"How's my little superstar?" he asked as he made sure to give me the worst massage in history. I was trying not to scream the entire time.

"Dad, come on, knock it off."

He gave my shoulder a slap for good measure. "Okay, okay. Lighten up a bit. It's not like you died or anything. Your little girlfriend is still around and you're gonna be the quarterback again when you feel better and everything is going to be okay."

It wasn't wishful thinking or a request.

"Yeah."

He wasn't happy with how I all but told him to fuck off. He stood over me, scowling. "Don't talk to me like that."

"Like what?"

He ignored me and kept going. "And stop laying around and moping all day. You think you've got it bad? I broke my neck playing football when I was your age. I could have been somebody. You just got a busted leg. Give it a few months and you'll be back to normal."

I rolled my eyes. "Sure."

Next thing I knew, I was reeling from a backhand to the temple. Even though I wanted to beat the shit out of him, I couldn't. I had to grit my teeth and bare it. It was even more embarrassing than the stuff with the basketball players. He gave me a lighter smack as I recovered from the first one.

"I know you've been talking about quitting the team," he continued. "Wanna throw your future away? End up flipping burgers? That's what's gonna happen if you don't make the NFL, you know. Do you think *Ashley* is going to stick around if you're just another bum making minimum wage? Jesus fucking Christ, why would you even *think* of quitting? What's the matter with you?"

He didn't give me a chance to respond. He stormed off and slammed the door of his private study, which ended up shaking the whole house a bit. Nothing would have made me happier than shoving his hand in between the door and the frame and slamming it shut with all of my might. He deserved nothing more in the world.

I told myself I wouldn't let this get to me. He's said and done so much worse over the years. This was nothing. Just a little ridiculing that I got ten times worse at school. So when I started to cry, I felt as bad as I did in the lead-up to the crash. I ended up hobbling up the stairs to hide in my room.

As I cried in my bed that evening, I wished I was dead. There's no other way to put it. I wanted to die just as badly as I did before I wrecked. At least I was home alone to wallow in self pity. Megan was

doing homework with Candice and he left to drink or fuck a hooker or whatever he does when he isn't home. I didn't care. I was just happy no one could hear me weeping.

And then part of me got lonely. I needed someone. As much as I hated the world and my dad and myself, I needed to vent. To open up to someone. My hand had a mind of its own when it reached for the phone and began to dial.

"Hey. Is um... is this a bad time? Shit. I'm sorry. I... Yeah. Yeah, I just needed to talk. To anyone... No, you don't need to do that. Just... Are you sure? Okay. Key's in the flower pot. Thank you. Thank you. Bye."

Lauren was walking into my room before I knew it. The sun was beginning to set and the warm orange and red glow from outside of my window made her shine. Just looking at her made my heart start to beat a little faster, regardless of how shitty I felt.

"Hey," she said softly as she stood beside me. "Are you okay? You wanna talk about it?"

I gently nodded my head and moved over so she could sit down beside me. I was so happy that I bothered to clean my room and change my sheets. If she came in here and it was a mess, I'd have probably died. I pointed at the nightstand. "But first, could you hand me that bottle on the dresser? Yeah, that one."

She reached over and took the bottle of painkillers in her hands. Thankfully I wasn't becoming addicted to them like a lot of people had been after using them. At least I didn't think I was. They felt amazing, but I could handle some pain every now and then. I took my nightly dosage and swallowed them with a gulp of water from a bottle I keep by my bed.

"I'm sorry you need to use those," Lauren said.

"What? These?" I asked while showing her the bottle again. She nodded. "Oh, please. Drugs are amazing!" Probably not the best thing to say to the girl who dated someone with a cocaine problem. I felt that familiar gaping pit in my stomach open up as the guilt consumed me for making such a bad joke.

"Just don't go crazy with that stuff, okay?" she warned.

"I won't," I promised. "But damn, if they don't help." I sat back in bed and studied every inch of her body. I think she could tell I was watching her because she looked away and brushed a strand of hair from in front of her eyes. "I'm sorry I called you so late."

"Don't be. I don't mind coming over." She looked back at me. "So what's going on?"

"I just..." Finding words was never easy for me, especially when talking about myself. That's why I think I was so good at football. All I had to do was memorize what to do and say. It was structured. Meanwhile, I'm a fucking mess. How do I begin to discuss how I feel when I can't even begin to describe it? "I feel like I don't have a future."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't play football now and if I ever do again, I'll never be the same again. I don't know what I'm going to do when I graduate if I can't play. My dad hates me, but whatever. Fuck him. I worry about my sister most of the time I'm not worrying about myself..." I rested my head back into my pillow, completely exhausted. "God, I can't believe I called you over just to bitch and moan about my stupid problems."

I felt a hand gently grasp mine. It was soft. Warm. I instinctively held it tight and massaged her fingers with my thumb. When I looked up, she was smiling at me. "It's okay. Don't feel bad about needing to talk to someone." She chuckled a little. "I mean, I'm no therapist, but you can talk to me about whatever."

I have an issue with sincerity sometimes. People giving me gifts, people doing nice things for me. Stuff like that and I freeze up a little. I try not to, but it just sometimes happens. Maybe I'm just not used to someone actually caring. When she said she'd be there for me, I had never been more sincere in all of my life when I said, "Thank you."

"What I *can* help with are the basics," she continued. "Like college. Do you really think you'll never play football again?"

"Want me to be honest?" I asked. She nodded. "I'm gonna tell Coach I'm quitting. I mean, I'm already off the team because I tried to fight Brad, but I'm going to officially quit the next time I talk to him. I couldn't today, though. He was being too nice. I think he blames himself for..." I nodded to the sling around my arm and the cast on my leg.

She didn't speak until she was sure I was done talking. "You know we'll all love you whether you're the quarterback or not. Right?"

*You'll love me?* "My dad won't."

"Then fuck him. If he isn't happy for you for doing what's best for you, then he's not worth being upset over."

"Clearly you've never met my dad," I said. Thank God she didn't.

"Okay so you're done with football," she said. "So what? Who cares? Do what makes *you* happy. And if football doesn't help then maybe it's for the best that you quit."

"What about college?" I asked. Even though I came to terms with quitting, I wanted to know what she had to say about this. I'm turning down what could be full rides to some of the best schools in the country on the condition I play ball for them.

"Fuck college, too," she said. "It's expensive and all you do is eat noodles and get drunk and high every weekend. I do that for a lot less money already."

She grinned at me. I smiled back. "I don't know..." I said. "There's a lot to be said for spending a hundred grand to get drunk with the frat kids on Saturday nights."

She laughed. "You don't need to go to college, you know. At least not yet. Why worry about all of that stuff right now?"

"I'm already sick of it," I admitted. "And we're already juniors! Like Jesus Christ, if I hear someone ask me *Oh, what are you gonna major in, buddy?* one more time, I swear to god I'm gonna jump in a lake."

"Would you mind if I pushed you and then jumped in, too?"

"Not at all. I can get the wheelchair if you'd like." We laughed a little. "So what's going on with you? Is it why you left the party so quickly?"

"No, no, it's not that," she said. "I like to think I have everything figured out. I mean, I have volleyball and my Mom knows people in USC admissions that can all but guarantee me some kind of scholarship if the volleyball plan falls through... But I don't know..." She gently lied down beside me so I scooped over. "Do you have any idea how much Ashley talked about school when we were dating?"

"Ashley spent too much time talking about college and bragging about having her entire future planned out before she even graduated? *Nooooooo!*" We laughed together, her breath warming my face up.

Then Lauren's smile began to fade. "I broke up with Beth."

That evil little voice inside of me started speaking terrible thoughts and putting awful ideas in my head. "Wait, what?"

“Yeah,” she said. She looked like the one who was going to cry. “Two days ago. Today was the first day I didn’t cry my eyes out after seeing her in the halls.”

“Shit,” I said softly. “What happened?”

## Lauren

Spencer was hurting and I had to be there for him. When he called, I broke multiple speed limits driving over to see him. I needed to be there for him. He actually cared for me. I was devastated when I heard what happened to him. I have a close group of friends that care about me, but Spencer was always good to me and I could *not* lose him like I lost Michelle. So when he reached out to me in his time of need, I wasted no time making sure I was there for him.

And looking back on everything, I know the other reason why I went over. I wanted to make Beth mad. I was angry and hurt and confused and I directed all my rage at her. We had just broken up and I wanted to show her how angry I was. I don't hate myself for what happened next, but I do regret *why* I did it.

I explained to him that we were having a disagreement and I felt upset. He listened the whole time I spoke without interruption. The only part I left out was the part about my suspicion that Beth leaked the pictures of Ashley and that she was there when Brad was about to assault her. He'd probably kill her if he knew that. And I technically didn't know if she did it or not so I couldn't bring anything forward without proof. It'd be so scummy.

Instead, I told him something I had only thought quietly to myself when she said something really extreme. I told him that she was becoming really controlling and angry. I said I caught her hanging out with Damien and I thought she did some kind of a drug deal with him or something. I said that she had been scaring me a lot lately with her behavior. And I finished by admitting that I felt like the bad guy for leaving her.

He spoke up and assured me that I wasn't the bad guy here. "It sounds like she's got some issues," he softly said. "It's probably for the best that you guys broke up. You can't be her crutch forever."

That really stuck with me. It made me think about the last few weeks of my relationship with Ash. It was a pretty rough time of my life. When she was getting really angry with people and snapping at everyone, including me. She was partying too much and pushed people away and really lived up to her "Queen Bee" persona she just kind of adopted over the course of the year. I hoped my big birthday surprise would be what helped her feel joy again. Instead, we broke up and went our separate ways until fate brought us back together.

This time, I stood up for myself and the people that were being hurt and told Beth she needed to change. I wasn't going to be the "crutch" in the relationship. Ending it was the best for me. Hearing someone say I was in the right made me feel a lot better about my decision.

When I looked back at the clock, I saw that we had been talking for over an hour. It was the longest I had gone without crying since the breakup. It was the longest I had actually talked about myself and what I needed to get off my chest in weeks. Months, even. Spencer just had a way of making the time go by and making me feel good about myself.

This was what I was missing. What I needed. Someone who cared and would listen. Someone who wanted a mutual understanding between two people. Not someone who pushed me aside and looked at me like I was a silly child when I spoke out of turn. I knew some people would judge me for what happened next. People talk and they spread rumors and say shitty things. That I'm pathetic, a loser, a whore. That I was just looking for something to take my mind off of Beth and make myself feel good. A quick hit of dopamine to rebound from days of feeling like utter shit. That I was an awful, disgusting bitch for throwing away what I had and replacing it so quickly.

Fuck them. I wanted it and he did, too. My only regret is not waiting for his leg to be better so we could do even more.



## Spencer

Even though we spent most of the time we had together discussing her problems with Beth, it felt almost relieving to hear someone else was having issues, too. It was like I wasn't alone in the world. When she held my hand and had to fight back tears when she worried that Beth was becoming a drug addict, I squeezed it tight and promised her that things would be okay.

"You can't blame yourself when the person you're dating makes bad choices," I said. It made me feel like some kind of marriage counselor or something. "You didn't force her to do anything. She chose to do it herself."

"But what if I was a really shitty girlfriend and ruined things again?" she asked. "I mean, the last time I was with someone she..."

We both knew what she was going to say. Ashley's cocaine habit was the only thing people talked about during the second half of the semester. That and the Kara and Grace feud. It got so bad that O'Reilly had to call her into his office to confront her about it. He had nothing on her, though, so she didn't face any consequences. We started dating a few weeks later.

"If things are bad for her and you want to help, I'll be right there with you," I said. "She was there for Ashley when she needed help and I won't forget that. But you did the right thing breaking up with her. Losing you might be the wakeup call she needs to get her life together."

She slowly nodded her head. "You're right... You're absolutely right." The next thing I knew, I found myself laughing a little bit despite the circumstances. Lauren looked at me like I was an idiot. "What?" she asked.

"I just realized..." I stopped to cough. It hurt my ribs. "You-You're only the second girl I've ever invited into my room."

Lauren started to laugh along with me and gave me a light punch to my good arm. Stupid, fun jokes are the world's greatest aphrodisiac, I guess. After my horrible attempt at comedy, she thought about what I said for the longest time. Like really focusing on my choice of words. I'm pretty sure she only blinked once as we looked at each other. She looked like she had something she wanted to say, but couldn't bring herself to say it. When she did speak, I got extremely confused.

"How bad does..." She motioned to my leg and arm. "All of that hurt?"

"Um... kinda bad," I said. "Not terrible, but not great. Better than before, though. But the doctor said it's going to ache for a few more weeks."

She pulled her hand from mine and slowly reached for my jeans. "That's okay. We can do something else instead."

The pills were really starting to kick in and knowing what was about to happen only made me feel even better. Part of me knew this was wrong. I thought I was taking advantage of her when she was upset. But I was too tired and sad to care. We needed each other. Before she started, I asked if she would kiss me. It was slow and passionate and heavenly. When she broke away, I closed my eyes and let things happen. I nearly passed out at one point. Actually feeling wanted made it all so amazing. And knowing it wasn't all a lie made it even better.

All I could say at the end was a simple, "Oh, fuck."

After it was done, she curled up beside me and we kissed and we promised to be there for each other. We did the same thing the next day after the meeting. I thought I was falling in love.

**ROCKY TURKIEWICZ**

## Lauren

“Rocky Turkiewicz.”

A picture of Rocky Turkiewicz, a tall high school boy wearing his ACH basketball uniform, appeared on the big screen. A local high school legend wearing what would now be considered a throwback jersey. A hero from a by-gone era.

“Rocky Turkiewicz was a student at Arlington City High from 2002 through 2006. A basketball star with a boatload of potential, he was compared to another young man who had recently been taken with the first overall pick in the NBA Draft in 2003.”

A picture of LeBron James during his rookie year with Cleveland shooting a basketball appeared on the screen.

“Rocky became a star his Sophomore year. He’d never even played organized basketball until his Freshman year, but hard work, commitment, a training schedule that would give the Marines a run for their money, and possibly some abuse from his parents led the young man to be a highly sought after draft pick. Everyone in the NBA was talking about him.”

The next picture showed what happened after Arlington won the State Championship: Rocky, then a Sophomore, sits on his teammates shoulders, arms raised and smiling like he’d just lost his virginity to a supermodel. This was a kid who had life wrapped around his fingers.

“But instead of declaring for the Draft, he decided to commit to Duke University with the intention of playing in college for two years under Coach K. And, going against the wishes of his coach, teammates, prospective agents, the NBA, and his peers, he decided he would join the football team to get into better physical shape and build more muscle for the upcoming season.”

It wasn’t hard digging up the picture of Rocky in his shoulder pads and jersey, kneeling and clutching a helmet under his right arm. It was in every yearbook and every local newspaper. Anyone who followed high school sports in Texas knew what happened.

“Or so he said, anyway. No one really knows why Rocky did it. Some kids alleging to be his friends swore he told them he wanted to rebel against his parents and basketball coach for pushing him so hard. His girlfriend at the time has never spoken out about the subject publicly.”

A couple of the guys thought it would be funny to include a Photoshopped picture of Rocky wearing emo clothes with a cigarette in his mouth and a spray paint bottle in his hand. I found it juvenile, but went along with it. It got a couple chuckles from the audience.

Another picture appears after the pretty dumb joke pic, this time of him and his girlfriend. She was the Head Cheerleader at the time and they kissed after a game. The Ashley before Ashley, the Kara before Kara. Most of the people enrolled with me were either in diapers or not even born when this all went down. I couldn’t tell you the first thing about any of these people.

“Another theory was that he needed a change of scenery and wanted to make friends who didn’t just see him as a star basketball player who only existed to make three pointers. Some of his friends would later say he was a very antisocial person who didn’t enjoy the spotlight and realized people were only using him for fame.”

Various pictures appeared in quick succession of Rocky and his family meeting with scouts from professional teams. One from the Dallas Mavericks, one from the Washington Wizards, and numerous ones from various colleges trying to convince him to decommit from Coach K’s Blue Devils.

“This was the more likely scenario because scouting reports leaked saying Rocky had the lowest leadership potential of all the projected high picks in the 2004 Draft. He was a very shy and quiet person.

Probably would never become a Captain or locker room leader that a team dreams of in a first overall pick. Even if he was a great player, no one would look to him to guide the team if he couldn't look his teammates in the eye. Football was meant to change that for him. Teach him how to lead. Give him the courage to be a real leader."

A picture of Rocky with the team, his parents and sister, Head Cheerleader girlfriend, and the fans and media surrounding him after a game. He smiles wide, looking genuinely happy. The basketball team won their second State Championship in a row and he gets to hold the trophy.

"But this is just speculation. He went on record saying he felt he was ready for the NBA Draft and could be a leader, but wanted to try new things before entirely dedicating himself to only one path for the rest of his life."

After doing some research, we found old footage of a practice early in the football season. Rocky stands on the sidelines with the coaches, reviewing the playbook before he goes out for a play with the rest of the guys. His hair was dripping with sweat and his face was red from the sun, but one glance and you can see he was as dedicated to this as he ever was to basketball. The Head Coach in question was none other than our dear Coach Mullens, though he had a full head of hair back then.

"Having had no prior football experience— and rumored to be facing pressure from the basketball coach and boosters to keep the basketball team's golden goose healthy— Rocky never saw much action during actual games. He mostly played on the practice squad, giving the starters some competition, but he always said he loved getting outside and getting hit, so he didn't mind. He just loved being there. Rumors still swirl about how he was allowed on the Varsity team to begin with despite no prior experience. Nepotism? A favor from the Principal?"

A black and white picture of the entire roster takes up ten seconds of the slideshow. Rocky stands in the center of the picture, smiling wide. No one else was smiling, not even the coaches. Spencer and Frank say it's a rule that the players *never* smile in group photos like this. Guys have such weird rules about acting tough.

"Fast forward to the season finale. Arlington was tied with long-time rival, Austin Prep. With three seconds left and an impossible Hail Mary to be attempted by Austin, Rocky was sent in to play defensive back due to his being 6'6" and his great jumping ability. All he had to do was knock the pass down if it came to him. *'Nobody would be stupid enough to throw it toward that giant,'* the Defensive Coordinator would famously say in later interviews."

The slideshows turned to old game footage of the play. The footage was grainy and looked like it was filmed on a potato, but you can clearly make out the giant that was Rocky Turkiewicz lined up at Safety in the middle of the field. The only people taller than him play on the offensive line, far away from where the ball will be going.

The Austin Prep Quarterback took the snap and the receivers sprinted down the field. He had to evade one Arlington defender and then he's completely alone in the backfield. He wound up and launched it downfield with all the strength he had. Apparently he would go on to play for the University of South Florida and eventually became a backup for the Chicago Bears and Cincinnati Bengals, but never saw playing time. When you see the footage and see how far the ball went, you can see why he made it to the NFL.

All the receivers and defenders rushed to where the ball was going and crashed into each other in a desperate attempt to catch the ball. Rocky took a step behind the crowd of bodies before leaping up and extending his arms. All that time spent catching rebounds was about to pay off.

“Next thing he knew, he had the ball in his hands and a wide open field in front of him. Everyone that was in front of him were either falling over or had lost the ball in the lights. Rocky could have just knelt down and sent the game to overtime, but he later said that nobody ever told him to do that. All his life, he was told to be the hero and be the star. This was his moment. This was his chance to prove everyone wrong and show he could do whatever he set his mind to. With no one around him able to tackle him, he imitated what he had seen on TV and began a jog down the field, searching for a way to reach the end zone. That jog became a run and that run became a sprint. He was as fast as lightning.”

You’d think he had been doing this for years. He just seemed to have a brain for escaping trouble and avoiding the big fat guys trying to tackle him. His defensive linemen provided some impressive blocks, too. Frank sat us down and explained everything that was going on and we made sure to take many notes so we knew how to report this like the wannabe broadcasters we were.

Everything was going great and Rocky narrowly avoided the running back from stopping him. All he had to do was keep running and he could score.

“As we all know, one of the Austin Prep kids whose name has been lost to time shadowed Rocky from behind the wall of blocks. Stalking Rocky like a tiger in the jungle, he waited for Rocky to make a bad move.”

When the Right Tackle got pushed away, Rocky turned and ran through that hole. When he did, the nameless player broke into a sprint and crushed Rocky like a bug. He went flying in the air from the unexpected blindside hit. Just watching the video left me cringing from an injury that happened to someone when I was a fetus.

“The benches cleared and a massive brawl broke out over the hit. The Arlington players weren’t happy that Austin Prep hurt the most popular guy in school and took exception to how the guy that hurt him began to dance after the hit. Austin Prep’s Coach claimed he saw one of our players throw the first punch. The game was ended with a tie by the referees and multiple players got suspended for the year.”

While everyone else on the field fought for their lives, poor Rocky was writhing around in pain on the ground.

“While the guys tried to kill each other, Rocky got eviscerated and when he fell, his leg twisted around like a dreidel. Rocky’s knee was dislocated and he tore his ACL, MCL, and LCL, along with his patellar tendon. Complications with the surgery and lack of interest from major colleges meant Rocky never played organized sports again. Arlington never forgave Austin for the actions of one student.”

Pictures from the newspaper of Rocky being carted off the field replaces the grainy video. Rocky gave the crowd a sad thumbs up while his family escorted him to the ambulance. His teammates crowded around the stretcher, clapping. A few of them had faces covered in blood from the brawl, others were dragged away by the coaches and police. His parents and girlfriend were in tears.

A picture from the 2007 NBA Draft appears on the screen. Jeff Green is selected 5th Overall by the Boston Celtics.

“In 2007, the year Rocky had said he intended to declare for the Draft, Jeff Green was drafted by Boston and immediately traded to the Seattle SuperSonics, who would later relocate to Oklahoma City and become the Thunder. The rumors were that had Rocky not been injured, this would have been his spot and he would have played with a young Kevin Durant during his rookie year and a young Russell Westbrook the following season.”

One picture of Rocky wearing his cap and gown and another of him receiving his high school diploma appears next. He had to stand on crutches and have support from his parents just to walk at his

own graduation. He beams at Principal Patrick as he shakes his hand and waves to the rest of his classmates nonetheless.

*It's like looking in a funhouse mirror of Spencer's life...*

"Rocky would go on to attend the University of Texas and get a degree in Sports Medicine after taking a gap year."

The slideshow ends and everything goes black.

"Kate, get the lights, please."

## Kate

When I flicked the lights back on, I had to close my eyes so they could readjust to the light. Whatever curtains they used in the Student Council office to turn it into a small screening room were really working.

It was Lauren, Beth, and Ashley's idea to make some big PowerPoint presentation in their attempt at uniting the football and basketball teams on the eve of the big fifteen year Anniversary. Homecoming was only nine days away and everyone was super on edge. There are prank wars... and then there's this... Anyone with an older sibling that went to Arlington warned their little siblings of what happens around their new school when the basketball and football teams butt heads.

I still don't understand it. It's stupid. Nevertheless, O'Reilly ordered Lauren to keep the peace so here we are wasting our first period to have an emergency Student Council meeting before the assembly with the guys from both teams later in the day. I didn't really care about being told to skip class, though. I couldn't sleep the night before.

"Thank you," Lauren said, finishing her speech. "Any questions?"

Natasha raised her hand. "Remind me why we should care again? Not trying to be *that guy*, but why would anyone here care about something from... what? 2004?"

"Because the football team and the basketball team have had beef ever since he got hurt," Tom explained. As a Senior and a member of the football team, he's been enduring this stupid prank war for four years. "Without Rocky, the basketball team didn't even make the playoffs that year. They were projected to win the Championship for a third year if he was healthy. They never forgave us for what happened, even though it was nobody's fault except the guy who tore his knee up."

I find it funny that Tom specifically said the phrase "*They never forgave us for what happened.*" They never forgave *us*. When this happened, he was... what? Two? They really do treat the football team like a brotherhood that spans decades. Like a sorority for guys in sweaty jocks.

Tyler smirked. "Sounds like they didn't have a shot to begin with if they relied on one guy to carry them on his back."

Alex glared at him, obviously offended that someone would dare mock people that he had never even spoken to that once wore his uniform. "My older cousin was on that team. The team was really good, but Rocky was *unstoppable*. Things just kind of fell apart without him."

"Regardless of the stupidity surrounding the rivalry," Lauren continued, "it's been fifteen years since the incident occurred. My sources tell me the basketball team might be planning something. Big."

"You have sources?" Ashley asked with a smile.

"Ashley, please," Lauren said, trying to maintain composure despite clearly wanting to laugh along with her over the silliness of what she had said. "I have no idea when it's going to happen, but it is going to happen soon. Homecoming is next week."

Victoria turned to Alex. "Did Vinny tell you about anything they had in mind?"

"Shouldn't you know that?" Tyler asked. "He *is* your boyfriend, right?"

Alex ignored the little joke. "Now that I'm on Student Council, they don't say anything to me anymore." He read the room and saw that none of us trusted him so he quickly explained himself. "Look, believe it or not, I hate this as much as any of you and if I can stop it, awesome. I'm just going to end up getting detention over something that I had no part in like last year and the year before that. If I can stop that, fuck yeah, I'll do whatever you want me to."

"I believe you," Tom said. "And Frank hasn't said if we had any retaliation planned for after whatever goes down. But if whatever happens is anything like what my brother told me happened when he was here on the tenth anniversary, it'll be ugly."

"Aren't we kinda lucky?" I asked. "I mean, most of the people related to the people that were here when Rocky attended are gone, right? The ones who are here were too young to remember or weren't even born yet. So this year... I don't know, maybe we're just overreacting? Just sit down Vinny and Frank and we can settle this like adults."

"She's right," Victoria said while Jasmine nodded in agreement for her best friend. "And if something actually happens, it's like you said," she said to Alex, "everyone is just going to get detention or maybe suspended. It's not worth losing a Saturday over something so stupid."

"So what can we do?" Hannah Waters asked. She had assumed the role of Treasurer that had been vacant up to this point. Beth had been doing the job until she and Lauren could find someone to pick up the slack.

*Speaking of, where is Beth? She was supposed to be here...*

"We're going to sit them down and make them behave," Ashley said bluntly. "At the assembly, we play the presentation and talk about school unity and friendship and love and all that jazz and force them to get along. After we do our part, if something happens, we go straight to O'Reilly and everyone gets suspended for a week. Our hands are clean if we at least do the bare minimum to keep things cool."

I took a peek at Alex to see how he would react to the threat of being suspended and he did not look very composed anymore. Just for a brief second, he looked like he wanted to protest, but he stayed quiet. I was pretty sure he knew more than he let on, though I've never been great at reading people.

"The only person they'd listen to is Spencer," Victoria said. "I mean, he is the most popular guy in school right now. Considering..." She looked at Ashley and quietly apologized.

"Will he help us?" Casey asked.

"Why wouldn't he?" Victoria asked.

"He would," Tom said. "I think so, anyway. He always hated this rivalry. I'm sure he'd want to help end it. It might help him get back on the team if he does some good deeds around here, too."

"Spencer's off the team?" Raymond Levitsky blurted out, ending his streak of bored silence he had going for the past five or so meetings. I figured out pretty early on that he didn't want to change the world or anything after his election. It was just another club to him.

"Guys. Focus." Lauren ordered, her obvious annoyance targeted more on Raymond than literally anyone else. "When we meet up to go over some work he missed when he was in the hospital, I'll ask him. Maybe having the President asking him will convince him." She smiled to herself and her friends, still enjoying being able to brag about being the President of something.

Part of me was jealous that she had been tutoring Spencer. If I was closer with him, I'd have asked if he needed help and happily volunteered. And then after a couple of meetings, who knows? Maybe I'd ask him out on a date. I bet he likes it when girls take charge in a relationship. He dated Ashley for months, after all. She definitely wore the pants in that relationship.



## Ashley

“Okay, so let’s say we did just get Spencer to help us,” Alex said. “What next?”

“We should do something big,” Jasmine suggested. “Something to show... solidarity and cooperation.” Victoria agreed with her.

I couldn’t help myself. I started to laugh a little. Her saying that made me think of this silly little idea I had when I was rewatching a personal favorite movie of mine. I made sure to watch it at some point before Halloween for three years straight. It’s one of those dumb thoughts that doesn’t go away and you keep laughing about it even though it shouldn’t be funny anymore.

“What’s so funny?” Casey whispered to me. I realized everyone was staring now.

“Actually,” I said after letting out one last laugh, “I think I have an idea.” I cleared my throat and continued. “Homecoming. There’s tons of people on the basketball team that don’t have dates, right?” Alex hesitantly nodded. “And there’s a bunch of cheerleaders who haven’t been asked yet.” It still surprised me that there weren’t dozens of people just lining up for a chance to go to Homecoming with one of the cheerleaders. Isn’t that every straight guy’s dream? Homecoming with one of the popular girls?

“So you want to play matchmaker and set them up...” Lauren said, slowly keeping my train of thought moving along.

“And use that as a way to distract the guys long enough so nothing happens...” Kate continued.

“And if something is going to happen, they can warn us and we will know so we can get the right people involved,” Victoria finished.

I held out my arms and smiled. “And who said blind dating is stupid?”

Tom quietly laughed a little. “Well, shit, that idea is almost weird enough to work.”

“Are you kidding?” Tyler asked. “That is the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“No...” Victoria said, thinking it over in her head. “No, it’s actually kind of genius. I mean, everybody will be accounted for at all times because their dates can snitch on them if they try anything and they’ll be too busy to do anything else. It shouldn’t be that hard setting them up.” She turned to face Tom. “Can you get me a list of every guy on the football team who doesn’t have a date?” When he nodded, she turned to Alex and asked him the same question, receiving a nod in return. “So that means we have a week to get as many people paired up as possible.”

“Are we really doing this?” Lauren asked me, smiling. “Are we really doing the thing from Carrie?”

I was genuinely shocked that she remembered that. After the movie, we made a joke about splitting up for the dance to give two lucky guys the night of their lives before we snuck off to hook up back at my place before she had to get home before her curfew. That never happened, though.

“Not exactly,” I said. “More like the thing from Mulan II. But yeah, it’s basically the plot of Carrie. Except no pig blood.”

“No what?” Raymond asked. I waved him off.

“Not exactly how I expected to spend my Monday, but I’m down,” Tom said.

“Thank you for doing this, you’re a lifesaver,” I said to him. I looked at Alex and smiled. “You, too. Thank you for doing this.” He gave me a small nod. I could tell he wasn’t exactly sold on the idea like we were. I turned to Lauren. “And I need you to tell Spencer what’s up and tell him to try and set up as many of these dates as possible. I feel like the guys would respect him enough to go along with it if he’s involved. And who knows, maybe I’ll set him up with someone to make it seem more official.”

Something about how her face shifted after I suggested it. God, she was so in love with this guy. Why don't they just fuck already? Despite her obvious conflicted feelings, she nodded and said, "I will try my best."

"God, Frank is gonna have a field day with this," Tom said.

"I can already hear him laughing like an idiot over trying to get Lonnie Dum with Sarah Bell," Victoria mused.

"Because they'd be a *DumBell*?" Casey asked. Everyone except Raymond and Tyler laughed and chuckled and groaned together. Lauren glanced at me, smiled, and rolled her eyes.

"Alright so I guess it's settled," Lauren said. "Does anyone else have anything to add?" When no one spoke up, she gave the gavel that Frank had fallen so deeply in love with a little smack and adjourned the meeting. "We get to have study hall for the rest of the day so go to the cafeteria to wait for the next class or go to the bathroom or do... whatever. Just don't get in trouble for not being in class. We'll meet in the auditorium before fifth period begins to get ready for the assembly."

## Lauren

With some time left after class, a few of us stuck around to talk. It kind of annoyed me because I wanted to be sure I got a good spot in the library for my tutoring session with Spencer. There's only so many prime makeout spots and I wasn't going to lose one to the band kids. But because I'm the President, I was more or less expected to stick around.

"I really want to ask how you came up with such a dumb idea," Victoria said, laughing. "I mean, blind dates with the cheerleaders to make the basketball and football teams too busy to fight each other? I love Carrie as much as anybody, but I never thought we'd go full Sue Snell to keep the peace around here."

"Yeah, it is really stupid, isn't it?" Ashley admitted, also laughing. "I did get some inspiration from Carrie, but one day I just thought up the worst plot line from cheesy shows like 90210 or Dawson's Creek or fuckin' Degrassi and just kinda built on it. The dumbest ideas I could think of that they never thought to use."

"Do you do this often?" Kate asked.

"More than I'd like to admit," she said. "Tell you the truth, I've really been thinking about getting into filmmaking one day. Maybe become a director."

"I thought you said you wanted to be a lawyer?" Casey asked.

Ashley looked at me and smiled a little before turning back to the others. "It's been on my mind for a while now and I think I'd be pretty good at it."

It felt weird knowing that she was still thinking about a one-off conversation we had months and months ago. I'm glad she found something she's interested in doing, though. She really would make a great director. She loves movies more than life itself. I mean, she took the plot of Carrie and turned it into a peacekeeping operation. I just hope I get an invite to the premiere of her first big movie.

We talked and talked until the bell rang, but my mind was elsewhere. Me and Spencer had only become a thing a few hours ago and I couldn't stop thinking of him. But part of me also began to feel guilty. Beth was nowhere to be seen and I had already moved on. Was she okay? I couldn't bring myself to text her to see if she was alright. I was dreading breaking the news to her that Spencer and I had started hooking up. I loved her so much, but I couldn't be with her. She wasn't good for me. Spencer was her polar opposite. It was so simple.

Am I a bad person?

## Kate

I feel like I really got to know the others after the meeting ended. They're all actually really nice. Casey opened up about not being sure of what they wanted to do when they graduated after Ashley said she was thinking of going into directing. Victoria said she wanted to get into show business while Jasmine said she wanted to work to find a cure for breast cancer after losing her mother when she was young. Hannah said she wanted to become a vet.

When they looked to me for what I was thinking of, I froze up and had nothing to say except "I'm still thinking about it." and then moving on back to Jasmine's story so we could all offer our condolences.

I don't know why I did, but I did. What's worse is I have an idea of what I want to do with my life. Even though it's full of monsters who want to ruin lives, I want to enter politics and try to actually help people. It's a big reason why I tried to run for Student Council President. Learn how to lead now and then actually govern later. I know it sounds really naïve of me, but I just want to make the world a better place. I don't care about money or power. I just want to help people.

Why I couldn't bring myself to say it, I still don't know. Maybe I was afraid they would think I'm an idiot. Maybe I was too socially anxious to actually admit to something so grandiose that was so different from what the others had planned. Whatever it was that made me keep my mouth shut, I regretted it. How can I possibly become a politician if I can't even talk to a group of people that actually want to be my friend?

As much as I hate to admit it, the stuff that went down with Tracy really shook my confidence. She was the first person to actually approach me and really wanted to be my friend and it was all a lie. I'd had a few weeks to think and rethink the situation and part of me doesn't even blame her. There was no way I could beat Spencer or Lauren and she wanted to ensure she had a spot with Spencer's friends if he won. What was really fucked up was how she tried to hurt Lauren and Beth. That was what made me so angry. I almost became a part of that and I hated it. I especially hated that I almost went through with it on my own and lied to them about it.

Now I felt like I had no one close. Ashley and Lauren were being sweet to me, sure, but that little cynical part of me was just waiting for one of them to screw me over in one way or another.

## Ashley

Lauren practically sprinted out of the room when the bell rang. She seemed really distracted while we were all talking. Victoria, Jasmine, and Hannah had class on the other side of the building and Casey and Heather had to run to their lockers so Kate followed me to my locker and we continued our chat.

"Is it bad that I didn't know what to say back there?" Kate asked. "About what I want to do with my life?"

"What? No, of course not," I said. "Casey didn't know what to say. And you're allowed to change your mind. There's nothing wrong with that."

She leaned against the locker beside mine as I took out the books I needed. She looked extremely dejected. "That's the thing, though. I know what I want to do. I just couldn't say it. I mean, I know what I want to do and everything, I just... froze."

"Why not? What is it?"

"I want to get into politics."

I need to preface this by saying that I love Kate to death and think she's an amazing friend and person. And that is exactly the problem: she's too nice. Politics is a game where people eat each other alive. Kate can't handle that kind of heat. Not now, anyway. She's too timid. Too sweet. She'd make a great First Lady, but I don't see her as the one actually getting the votes. It takes a special breed of asshole to actually become a career politician. I didn't have the heart to say that kind of thing to her, though.

"Why politics?"

"Everything just kinda sucks anymore." She lowered her voice and whispered, "Especially for people like you. I want to help."

I know this phrase gets thrown around a lot, but that was seriously the single kindest thing anyone has ever said to me before in my entire life. Kate was such a sweetheart. I don't deserve to be her friend. "Katie," I said as I leaned in to give her a hug. "You're too sweet. But I promise I can take care of myself."

"Damn, look at that!"

"Get a room!"

"Can we watch?!"

I looked up and saw a couple of the basketball players sauntering past us, pointing and laughing as they went. I made sure to remember each one of their faces. I wasn't letting my girls get paired up with these sleaze-bags. They could go on a date with their right hands and maybe choke themselves with it afterward.

After they left, I put my hand on Kate's shoulder. "Ignore them. They're pigs." Even though I could ruin those losers, I couldn't imagine what it'd be like if I was actually out.

"I already forgot it," she said. "So do you really think this idea of yours will work?"

I shrugged. "I have no idea. But it just screams *80's comedy* so how bad could it be?"

"If there's any cute guys left over, be sure to give them my number," she said with just the slightest hint of desperation.

"I'll be sure to find you the nicest guy I know and you'll have the best night of your life."

She smiled and gave me another quick hug. "Let's get to class," she said and hurried off. I had to scramble to grab my stuff before racing after her.

As she smiled and laughed at the sight of me stumbling through the crowds to reach her, I knew then that I needed to do something for her to show how much she meant to me. Not only because she

deserves to be with someone nice, but because I still have lingering guilt over knowing about that stupid plan with Tracy. I still owe Frank a kick in the balls over that. Kate can and should have an amazing night at Homecoming.

Thankfully my recent viewing of Carrie gave me the perfect idea.

## Spencer

The worst part of being a kid was missing recess. Being forced to stay in because of lunch detention or because you were sick and needed makeup work done with the teacher was always the biggest bummer ever. Keeping kids locked inside when it's a sunny day outside should be criminal. Fast forward to being a teenager with a busted up leg and now I was stuck spending every study hall I had for the next couple of weeks being tutored again to make up for all of the time I missed while I was in the hospital.

Normally I'd be upset that I was forced to waste my study halls that I'd otherwise spend sleeping or watching TV on my phone, but I didn't actually mind. Mostly because I had the sexiest girl in school wrapped around me with her shirt off in the private tutoring room that connects to the library. No windows and a lock on the door meant we had all the time in the world. I never knew how hot Lauren could be until she walked right into the room, locked the door, took her shirt off, and started making out with me without saying a word. I was in Heaven. If I didn't have a busted up shoulder and leg, who knows what could have happened in there.

At one point, she broke away and asked me, "What's the powerhouse of the cell?"

"Uh-duh-uh... mitochondria?"

"Good job. You get an A." For my reward, she started to kiss my neck.

We were at it like this for about fifteen minutes when we heard some people talking outside in the library. Even though we would never be caught from the safety of our locked room, we decided it was best that we end our little tutoring session there. We ended up snuggling for the rest of second period, sharing little stories of our lives and really bonding with each other.

"I was looking forward to that all morning," she whispered in my ear. I wanted her so badly, it's unreal.

"Me, too," I said. When she suggested this little rendezvous last night, I couldn't stop looking at the clock until first period was over. Time seemed frozen. I wanted to scream.

"And I can't wait for Homecoming," she added.

As much as I was dreading Homecoming because of my general hatred of school dances, I figured I would make an exception for her. "What color dress are you wearing?"

"Red," she said. She sat back and gave me the most seductive look I've ever seen in my life. "You'll get to see it even better when you rip it off me at my place afterward."

*Fuck.*

## Lauren

Spencer could barely keep his hands off of me during our “tutoring session.” Though I’d be lying if I said I didn’t initiate it. It was my idea to come in here. This was one of many places Beth and I would sneak off to if we wanted to have a little P.D.A., but strictly without the first part for obvious reasons.

It felt nice to feel desired again. Amazing, really. We planned to make things official by the time next Saturday rolled around and everyone would get to share our happiness, too. I just hoped Beth would take things okay when word reached her. I mean, it’s not like I cheated on her or anything. We broke up and it was over. I moved on.

I had one little favor to ask my new man before we made things official, though.

“So, hey, listen, lemme run something by you that we talked about in Student Council,” I began. I went through the whole idea Ash had come up with and how we needed him to sell the idea to the football team. When I finished giving the sales pitch, I said, “Look, this feud is stupid, dumb, old, and nobody around even knows what a Rocky Turkiewicz is, but if this is what it takes to keep the guys from killing each other, I’m for it.” I leaned in and gave him a little kiss on the ear and whispered, “It would mean a lot to me if you said you’d help me out, you know.”

I dated Beth. I think I know a thing or two about using your body to get what you want. She thought she was so clever waiting until we were done having sex or just asking me for something right in the middle of it when she knew I didn’t have the balls to say no. I knew what she was doing. Did she really think so little of me that she wouldn’t just talk to me and instead tried to use sex as the only way to get me to go along with stuff? God, I was such an idiot for being with her for so long. I just loved her too much to stand up to her.

*But why do I want to call her and beg her to take me back? Why am I so addicted to her?*

Spencer shivered a little as my breath tickled his ear. “Well, uh, I can, uh, see what I can do. But only because it’s you.” I kissed him on the nose. “And maybe after things get better around here, you and me can go out to a nice restaurant before the dance.”

I kissed him for real this time. “I’d like that very much.” Deciding to make it official, I dropped to one knee and popped the question. “I know this is normally a guy thing to do, but uh...” I pointed at his leg and he gave me a smirk and an *Oh, fuck you.* before I continued on. “Spencer Barnett. Would you do me the honor of being my Homecoming date next Saturday?”

He gave a little wave of his hands and started faked crying. “Oh, Lauren... this is all I’ve... I’ve ever really wanted... Yes, of course, I’ll go to Homecoming with you!”

We laughed and kissed and laughed again. It was at this point that I realized I never put my shirt back on. I didn’t mind, though. He didn’t make me feel uncomfortable or anything. The idea of us actually doing it was kinda scary, but also exciting. I’d never had sex with a guy before, but I knew Spencer was the right guy for me to try it with. Every time he kissed me, every time his hands rubbed against my body, every time my hands ran through his hair, I could tell that he was everything I needed in my life. I really was falling in love with him.

Saturday couldn’t come soon enough.



## Ashley

Whatever Spencer said worked because we had a meeting with the leaders of the football team during our lunch. A few of them were even skipping class to come see what was going on. Frank, Tom, Dwayne, Jamar, and Justin sat around the table with myself, Spencer, and Lauren, the architects of this great dive into an awful teen comedy movie storyline. Oh, and Tyler was there, too. He saw us all meeting and decided to ditch his Freshman friends and sit with the upperclassmen. As long as he kept his mouth shut, I was fine with it.

Being in charge of this meeting made me feel like some kinda Tony Soprano type. I was the Boss and these beautiful idiots were my capos and we were settling business as a family. A big, dysfunctional family that I would sell my soul to be emancipated from half the time, but a family nonetheless.

Upon glancing at Lauren, who was sitting to my side, I could see a fresh bruise had formed on her neck. I had to focus on the task at hand, but the thought of her and Beth's nighttime activities made my stomach hurt.

"This may be the dumbest thing I've ever heard in my entire life," Frank said point-blank after Dwayne finally joined us. "Like, seriously? This is the best you guys can come up with?"

"I thought you'd be into it," Lauren said. "It's kinda cute, if you think about it."

"The pun is cute," he said, in reference to Lonnie Dum and Sarah Bell's potential pairing. "But do you really think Vinny Romano is going to go for something as stupid as this?"

"Woah," I said, offended. "I thought long and hard about this idea."

"Tom told me you stole it from a horror movie where they all die in the end," Frank countered. Clearly he'd never seen Carrie because not *everyone* dies in the end. "Vinny wants to embarrass us in front of the entire school and make us all look like morons. How much easier will that be when we're proposing blind dates for Homecoming as a way of keeping the peace?" "There's a lot worse things that can happen than being laughed at by the basketball team," Lauren reminded him. "Suspension, for example."

Frank rolled his eyes. "Before we do any of this, we need to talk about who is going to be with who 'cause some of the guys already have people they want to ask."

"What are you waiting for?" Tyler asked. "Homecoming is in a week."

"Was I speaking to you, Freshman?" Frank asked with a scowl. He turned back to me. "Lonnie would never go for Sarah Bell. He's basically in love with Heather. And besides, Sarah Bell has the hots for Dwayne." Dwayne smiled to himself and Spencer gave him a fistbump. "And then there's Vinny. He's still with Victoria and if he's not doing this, why should they?"

"And then there's DeSean," Tyler reminded everyone. "I mean, who's going to want to dance with *him*? He doesn't even—!"

Frank reached behind Spencer and smacked him upside the head before he could finish the joke. "Not fuckin' cool, dude. Don't mock a guy for something like that. Understand?" Tyler murmured a small apology and sunk back into his chair.

"We have a whole week to figure out the specifics," I said. "In the meantime, we still have the assembly to get through. And after what happened last time, O'Reilly's going to be on our asses if anything bad happens."

"I just don't get why we don't ask O'Reilly to shut it down," Dwayne complained. "Just threaten to suspend all of us like you said he would and be done with it."

"Because that would mean doing his job," Lauren grumbled. "So while he stands around and looks good for stopping a prank war and uses it as an example of why he deserves to be made Superintendent, we have to do the actual work."

"And they've been trying to scare them for years," Spencer said. "Charles said his older brothers were here when they had some actual carjackers steal the quarterbacks' car in the middle of the school day and send it to a chop-shop. The guys who organized it got a week's suspension and had to pay a fine and he *still* TPed the same guy's house the next year."

"Such bullshit," Tom said in agreement.

"I think we all agree that this has gone on long enough and nobody wins with violence," I said, "So unless anyone here has a better idea..." When nobody spoke up, I continued on. "We have fifth period all to ourselves to settle this. Just be nice and don't piss them off and we can have the great Homecoming that I have been working on for weeks to be absolutely perfect. Okay?"

Everyone nodded and quietly agreed. The guys who were skipping class hurried back before one of the lunch monitors could catch them out of class. All that remained were myself, Spencer, Lauren, Frank, and Tyler, who sulked back to his friends after being made a fool of. I did not have an issue with seeing him go.

"I still can't believe I agreed to this," Frank said.

"If you have a better plan, I'm all ears."

It wasn't even supposed to be the official plan. Just a goofy idea to lift people's spirits after all the shit that's been going on for the past month. Now we were actually going through with it and I couldn't feel more nervous if I tried. They were all going to laugh and think it was the most stupid idea they had ever heard in their lives. I was tempted to call up Beth and see if she had any thoughts. She had a knack for dealing with people like Vinny so I figured it couldn't hurt. Nobody could get a hold of her, though, so I decided it was best to let her be sick in peace.

The rest of the day went by at a snail's pace. When fourth period finally began to wind down and O'Reilly made the call for Student Council to assemble in the auditorium, my heart began to beat faster and faster. I thought I was going to have a panic attack or something.

I made a pitstop in the gym and dialed Beth's number. It was all I could think to do to ground myself. Maybe hearing a voice over the phone would be enough to settle me down and prevent me from passing out or bawling my eyes out on the dusty tile floor.

*"Hi, it's Beth Hill. Leave a message and I'll get back to you soon."*

**BLEEP**

"Hey, Beth, it's Ashley. Obviously. I know you're really sick right now and probably want to be left alone, but I could really use some advice right now. We're having that assembly with the basketball team and I'm pretty sure they're going to laugh us out of the room and... You know what, it's a long story and I don't want to bother you, but if you can give me literally any advice, I could really use it. Haha, I'm kinda freaking out right now. So, anyways, um... I hope you're feeling okay. We all miss you. Me especially. You really know what you're doing at these things and I could use you right about now. If you can't text back, no worries. Lauren seems to have everything under control. See you soon, hopefully. Bye."

I've never been good at talking over the phone so that was one of the most painful things I've ever done in my life. We also hadn't exactly spoken a whole lot since the incident after Michelle's funeral and that has been lingering in my mind. Even if we never exactly got along in the past, I can tell she was

actually a good person. She really had my back. That means something to me. In time, who knows? We might even become friends.

Filled with the flimsy hope that someone might have my back one day, I took a breath and marched to the auditorium with my head held high. How badly could we really fuck something like this up?

## Lauren

The time had finally come for the assembly. Mr. O'Reilly called for all the members of the two teams to arrive in the auditorium for the meeting. He stood guard outside to make sure no one got into any fights as they walked in. It was the most useful he had been all semester.

Vinny led the basketball team as a unit. Two lines of guys walking side-by-side. If they had their steps coordinated, you'd think they were the guards who stand outside of Buckingham Palace and get harassed by tourists all day. They marched down the aisle and made their way to the left side of the auditorium. Their seating area was marked with some signs that read "WELCOME BASKETBALL TEAM" in big red letters. And during the whole march, no one said a word. Not so much as a whisper. They were in perfect step.

The football team was much more disorganized. They stormed in like elephants, laughing and talking the whole time. The room echoed with their chatter. They glared at the basketball players as they passed by. Some hurled light insults or cursed under their breaths. It took them a while to actually take the seats they wanted. Frank and Tom sat in the front row, leaving the end seat available.

*Jesus Christ, will you get over yourselves? At least Frank is being civil. But would it kill him to tell the guys to quiet down?*

The last person to enter the room drew everyone's attention. Spencer hobbled down on crutches. Slowly. He told me that he would make sure everyone saw him. Maybe throw them off their game a little. He finally reached the bottom of the ramp and sat down beside Frank. Vinny was in the first seat across the aisle, directly opposite of Spencer. He gave Spencer a nod and turned back to face me before Spencer could react.

When everyone took their seats, O'Reilly gave us the go-ahead from the doorway and closed them as he left. It was up to me to save the day. Part of me wished Beth was here, but I needed to handle this. It was my job. Apparently.

I motioned to Kate to flick the lights and the room went dark. Heather and Casey were on computer detail. They may share a brain, but they could manage to click a button. As the video began to play, I worried the sound was off or something because nothing happened. It turns out there was just a delay. Sister Sledge's hit "We Are Family" began to play.

The video itself was a combination of highlights from the seasons of both teams. Spencer evading tackles and throwing a touchdown. Vinny driving through the paint and scoring a layup. Frank spinning out some big guy and running into the end zone. Lonnie dunking. Dwayne making an acrobatic catch. DeSean making a three pointer without jumping.

Tom and Alex made sure we had access to as much footage as possible for the video. They signed into the websites they watch game film from and let us rip clips as we see fit. Ashley, Victoria, and Jasmine took care of editing it. Apparently Jasmine has some kind of YouTube channel where she talks about makeup or something and she edits all her videos. With Victoria and Ashley picking out what clips to use and Jasmine on editing duty, they actually put together a really good video. The song was my idea. I can't say I'm into disco, but it's a pretty catchy song. Beth got me into it. I guess it's a Pittsburgh thing.

After a series of game-winning scores, buzzer beaters, and team celebrations, the video finally came to an end. Even though I'd seen it half a dozen times by now because they wanted my input after every little change they made, I still managed to be impressed by it. I'm really glad we work so well as a team. I owed them big time for this.

The lights came back on and I could see the guys looked less than interested. A few were feigning falling asleep to get a laugh from their buddies. Two or three were texting. The thing that pissed me off was that they were all the football guys screwing around. They are supposed to be the victims who want this to end. Why were they being so difficult? Vinny and his group showed no emotion, but they also weren't being assholes about it either.

I took a breath and began my little unity speech I had planned out. "So what was the point of that video?" Saying it out loud made me feel like a teacher or something. Lecturing the kiddies who were in timeout for their misbehaving.

"Make Spencer feel bad because he can't run like that anymore?"

I couldn't hear who said it, but one of the basketball players broke ranks and decided to be cute. Vinny stood up and looked back at his boys. The ones who were smiling quickly shot back into serious mode and the ones who were laughing shut right the fuck up.

"Hey, fuck you, too," Frank said, turning in his seat.

"*Enough*. Please." Spencer looked around at the teams and stayed nice and calm. "It was a joke. It was funny. Let's just... forget it. Okay?"

"Thank you," I said to both Spencer and Vinny for keeping the peace. "It's okay to speak up, but try to be respectful. Please? So, as I was saying. What's the message here?"

"I have a feeling the message was in the song," Vinny said. "We Are Family."

"Very, good. Vinny." He gave me a small smile and I continued on. "This feud has gone on long enough. I understand why there's animosity between your teams, but—"

"No you don't," DeSean said. "Rocky Turkiewicz could have been a basketball *legend*. He's like the patron saint of our team. What happened to him was a tragedy."

"He got hurt playing a sport he *chose* to play," Frank countered. "That hardly seems like a tragedy to me. Nobody forced him to play."

"How'd you feel if your future was ruined because of a bad decision?" DeSean asked.

"Pretty shitty," Frank admitted. "But it wasn't a bad decision. He could have gotten hurt at any time. On or off the court."

"Guys," Victoria scolded from the seat beside me. "Listen to Lauren, please. I don't want to be here all day."

I watched Lonnie whisper something to Vinny, who smiled a little. "Yeah seriously, guys, come on," I said. "If you can't get over this in the name of school unity and... all of that stupid bullshit, at least think of the rest of us."

"What do you mean?" Dwayne asked.

"O'Reilly told me he's gonna cancel basically everything if either of us try anything," Spencer answered for me. "That means Snow Ball, Senior Sleepover, Prom, maybe even walking during your graduation. Gone."

That got them talking. All the Upperclassmen were instantly on their feet and yelling out protests and grievances at us. It's not like I had anything to do with it, but I understood why they were mad. If I couldn't go to Homecoming with Spencer because of some stupid prank war I have absolutely no stake in except what O'Reilly forced on me, I'd be fucking furious.

"Do any of you really want to be the reason why they cancel Prom?" Ashley asked.

"I'm not staying home because *you* decided to ruin it for the rest of us," Jasmine warned.

"And who knows what else he'll do if you piss him off," I said, hammering the final nail in. "Suspend anyone involved. Maybe even expel them. Shit, he might even suspend the basketball season

this year if you guys do it,” I said as I looked at Vinny and his guys. “Or just outright end the rest of the football season and just end the season now with a bunch of forfeits.” Spencer gave me a little nod to say that I was doing well. I forced myself not to smile at him. He was so cute.

“Fuck that, he can’t do that!” Vinny said.

“Who knows what he might do,” Ashley said. “But is it worth it to find out?”

“No, you don’t get it, a lot of the guys need film if they want to get into college after they graduate,” Vinny complained. “We *need* this season if we want to get scholarships.”

I knew that I had him now. He needed a free ride and I needed his cooperation. I decided to finish this. “I know you don’t want to ruin your futures over one mistake you made in high school. You’d be an idiot if you did. But if you want to do something you’ll regret in ten years and end up a loser without any friends, be my guest. Smash up Spencer’s truck. And if you want to end up like Brad and get the shit kicked out of you in the gym and get kicked out of school, I can’t stop you. But just remember what’s at stake here. For all of us.”

We let that simmer in the air for a minute. Really let it sink in. Spencer was the one who spoke up. He may not have been on the team anymore, but he spoke for them all. “So can we please count on you guys to not do anything stupid?”

Vinny nodded. “Yeah. You can.”

“No funny shit from us, either,” Frank said. “I promise.”

“Thank you all for coming out here and being so understanding,” I said after glancing at the clock and realizing we were out of time. “I guess we’re dismissed.”

## Spencer

All things considered, I think things went pretty okay. Nobody tried to commit a stabbing and Vinny kept the guys on his team in line. Even though I wasn't on the team anymore, it was nice to know they still respected me enough to want me in the room. It still didn't change my mind that I was done with football, though. I hoped they would understand when the topic finally came up. In the meantime, I was going to bounce around it until I knew I was ready.

After it was over, a few of us stuck around to talk. Frank and Vinny stayed, too. We wanted to make sure there was absolutely no bad blood and that we all understood each other.

"Well... that went well..." Victoria said. "I think."

"Yeah," Frank said. "It did."

"I promise there won't be any shit from me or my guys," Vinny said. "We are *not* missing this season. And if I hear anything, I promise we'll go straight to O'Reilly and get it sorted out."

"Fuck O'Reilly," Lauren spat. "Come straight to me, Spencer, or Ashley. If he wants to have us deal with everything, then we will deal with it."

It was really inspiring to know that our own Principal was taking such a hands-off approach to this. I'd love to know how he'd react to a fire or a shooting. He'd probably make popcorn and watch to see who dies first. Maybe take bets on who dies first.

"He really left you guys out to sink or swim, huh?" Vinny said with a grin.

"It sucks. But we can manage." Lauren shifted in her seat and cleared her throat. "By the way," she continued, "me and Ashley had an idea we wanted to run by you."

They proceeded to discuss the plan. She kinda went on for so long that it started to sound like she was rambling. To be fair, the idea is absolutely insane and probably the dumbest thing I've ever heard in my life. But I was gonna support her no matter what.

After they finished speaking, Vinny cracked and started laughing hard. "That's... the dumbest idea I've ever heard in my entire life." Before Ashley could protest, he motioned for her to wait. "No, no, I'm not saying we won't do it. I absolutely love this shit! It's something you'd see on, like, Glee or Riverdale or some shit. We're doing this. I'll have to run it by the guys, but I should be able to make it work out. Some of the guys already have dates, though."

"That is no problem," Ashley promised. "And if any guys have anyone in mind that they would like to go with, I can make it happen."

"Do you have a date?" he asked. "I know a few guys on the team who would kill to go with you. Hate to break their hearts like that."

"I'm not interested in going with anyone this year."

Vinny shrugged and said, "Suit yourself."

Lauren pointed to Frank. "Any more questions or concerns?"

Frank shook his head. "This is insane and stupid, but I promised Spencer I'd go along with it."

Lauren smiled. "Well then I guess we are done here. Why don't we just shake hands and go our separate ways?"

Frank and Vinny had a bit of a tense handshake before heading out different doors. After they were gone, we all collectively breathed a sigh of relief. Lauren started rubbing her eyes. "I feel like I'm babysitting a hundred toddlers here."

"At least we're here to help," Ashley offered. "And hey, things did go well. I feel like we really got through to them."

"Let's see if they actually listen, though," Jasmine warned.

"They will," I said. "They have to. Now that they know what's at stake."

"Vinnie will," Victoria said. "And I'll keep an ear out for the basketball team, too. I spend half my time around them anyway."

"And I'll watch out for the football team," Tom said. "But I doubt they'd do anything now." He looked up at the clock. "Shit, I'm gonna be late to practice. I'll catch you guys later." He grabbed his stuff, gave Casey a quick kiss, and hurried out of the room.

"Did I do okay?" Lauren asked everyone when the door closed behind him. "I mean, I thought it went fine, but I thought I came off as kind of condescending and stuck-up."

"You did fine," Ashley said. "I promise."

"You did better than I would have done," Victoria said with a warm smile. "We're gonna be alright. And if the worst happens, what are they gonna do? Suspend us for not doing a good enough job? Seriously, *fuck* O'Reilly."

"Such a douchebag," Jasmine said.

"Hey, by the way," Hannah said. "Where's Beth at? I wanted to ask her something."

"No idea," Ashley said. "I tried calling her, but she never picked up."

"Maybe she's sick?" I offered. When I looked to Lauren for confirmation, she didn't respond. I found this to be very strange because I knew how close they were. I hoped things were alright between them, considering the circumstances.

Jasmine cleared her throat. "You guys know this is the second big student council thing that she's missed, right?" Nobody spoke up so she went on. "I mean, isn't she supposed to be the Vice President? Helping you run these things?" Lauren didn't speak up, but I could tell she wasn't exactly happy that this conversation was happening. She quickly backtracked so as not to come off as the bad guy here. "Look, I don't know the girl so I don't want to sound like an asshole. I'm just saying, she's supposed to be at these things."

"I'll talk to her," Ashley said. "I was thinking about swinging by her house after school anyway." Jasmine seemed satisfied enough with this.

After they left, Lauren and I snuck off to hug and celebrate her big victory. "You did amazing!" It was really great to see her in charge of everything. Kinda hot, honestly.

She giggled and blushed. "I was having a fucking heart attack the entire time. Like full on panic attack bad."

"But you got through it and everything went well," I reminded her. "You're amazing." We kissed and hugged and kissed and then went off to go back to her place to eat and do whatever. My leg wasn't bothering me so badly that day and I decided to use the crutches for most of the trip.

I really felt like things were looking up.



## Ashley

"I really didn't think that was going to go so well," I admitted as Kate, Victoria, Jasmine, Hannah, Casey, and Heather walked down the hallway. "Like, I was kinda terrified they'd laugh us out of the room and we'd be stuck back at square one."

"And then O'Reilly might have to get involved," Victoria said.

"What a nightmare!" Jasmine exclaimed. Hannah smiled.

"What do you think?" Victoria asked Kate. "You've been really quiet. Everything okay?"

Kate told me how much she hates crowds and strangers. And when you're kinda socially awkward and are being thrown into the water with the likes of Victoria Falco and have to strike up a conversation, you kinda have to fend for yourself. Like Vinny said: sink or swim.

"Oh, um, yeah, no, everything's fine," she quickly said.

Victoria was one of the most popular girls in school. The Shay Van Buren to my Mackenzie Zales. Minus the blood feud, obviously. (I started watching the show to have an excuse to talk to Lauren again.) We were popular for different reasons around here. In all honesty, we just really never talked much outside of parties or lunch if we found ourselves at the same table. We just kinda had different groups of friends and rarely interacted. I did find her overall positivity to be quite infectious. She was just a really nice person.

It was horrible what happened to her last year. Before all of that bullshit went down, Victoria was a superstar basketball player in the making that had colleges drooling over the chance to recruit her. Not to mention she was basically running the musical and had the lead role all but locked in after she became a Sophomore, since Freshmen *never* get a shot at lead roles. She had so much going for her and the world was her oyster.

Then some guy from Davy Crockett leaked her nudes.

No one knows exactly why he did it. Petty revenge? Jealousy because she moved on and was kinda-sorta-absolutely dating Vinny? Being paid off to destroy her life and ruin her basketball career? It didn't matter. In the end, she was ruined. She quit the basketball team and started spending most of her time at home. She left anyone that reached out to her over the phone on read. She started wearing much baggier clothes and long-sleeved shirts. Then the rumors about her being checked into rehab for a drug addiction began to spread. She missed a lot of school after the pics came out and I think anyone could understand wanting time away from school after that. If Jasmine hadn't been there for her, who knows what would have happened to her. They're as close as sisters.

In some ways, we're a lot alike. What happened to her was infinitely worse than what happened to me, though. But in some ways, we are. Pictures leaked, quitting our respective teams, pushing away our friends and eventually finding new ones. I didn't know if we would become close friends because of Student Council, but I wasn't opposed to the idea.

Kate, meanwhile, needed a bit of help in the "friendship department" and I had an idea of how to fix her problem.

## Lauren

Spencer and I were still catching our breaths after a particularly aggressive makeout session when he asked me a question that I was not ready for and had no intention of answering.

“Why did you and Beth break up? Like what exactly happened?”

My hair was a mess. I knew I looked ugly. “Why do you want to know?”

“I guess I just don’t want to make the same mistake,” he said softly. “I really like you. I don’t want to lose you.”

Even if he was prying into something he had no business with, I couldn’t help but find him as sweet as candy. So, despite my reservations against discussing my pathetic excuse of a love life, I decided it was best to open up. It’s not like he wouldn’t talk about him and Ash if I asked, after all. “Okay, but you need to promise you won’t tell anyone.”

“Why would I tell anyone?” he asked. “You know I’d never out you like that.”

I shook my head. “No, I just... I *need* to hear it. Just do me that one favor.”

He kissed me again and promised he would never tell a soul. “If I’m lying, may my soul forever burn in Hell.” He smiled a little. “That’s a line from the Mafia initiation oath.”

“But you’re not Italian?”

“I’m having some spaghetti and meatballs for dinner tonight. That kinda counts.”

Again, sweeter than candy.

“Okay...” I had to spend a second collecting my thoughts. It took longer than I expected it would. Spencer waited patiently for me to speak and never tried to start the conversation back up. When I was ready, I finally began to let loose thoughts I had only had nightmares of ever saying to anything with a pulse. “Beth is the best thing that ever happened to me. Like, no offense, but she is. She made me realize so much about myself and made me feel so good about myself and she helped me get out of a terrible point in my life that I never thought I would recover from.” Just remembering that time was hell for my psyche. It felt great to relive our good times in my mind, but it only hurt more to remember how it ended. “But sometimes... I don’t know... sometimes she can make me feel like shit about myself.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, breaking his little Mafioso code of silence.

“So, like, this one time, I admitted to her that at one point, I wanted to be a singer,” I began, “and I told her that growing up, I’d sing in front of the mirror for hours at a time and I’d have my parents buy karaoke CDs just so I could practice timing and stuff. It was never going anywhere and I knew that, but it was a dream I had since I was little. And when I told her that, she just kinda started laughing. And when I asked her what was up, she just kinda said, ‘Wait, were you serious? Lauren, I love you to death, but you suck at singing.’ and then passed it off as a joke and that she loved my voice and stuff, but I knew she was serious.”

When I paused to think of what I wanted to say next, he said what I was thinking. “I mean, that’s really not cool of her. Why would you say that to your *girlfriend*? Even if you don’t want to be a singer anymore, she didn’t need to bash your singing.”

“Exactly!” I exclaimed. “And, like, she liked using a ton of big words and talking very eloquently and sometimes it makes me feel like an idiot even though I know she doesn’t mean to. But at the same time, it feels like she babies me a lot. Like, she thinks she knows what’s best for me and what she says will make my life better and then I just go along with it to make her happy, but I’m quietly dying inside because I don’t want to do it. I didn’t even want to run for Student Council. She just kept saying that it

would be good for me and we could run the school together and stuff like that and I went along with it. Like an idiot.”

“Do you regret running?”

“Honestly? No. I actually kinda like being in charge of things. It keeps me busy and I feel important. But I wish it was *my* idea instead of hers.” I perked up and pointed at him. “Here’s another one. Remember how I used to be a cheerleader?” He nodded. “She was pushing for me to join the squad again and go for Head Cheerleader.”

“Just rejoin the cheerleading squad? But you hadn’t cheered in, like, a year?”

“I know!” I said. “And all of a sudden, she wanted me to be Head Cheerleader? Ash was basically guaranteed the job regardless of if I was on the squad or not. And it’s not like they would just give the job to me if I had randomly joined. That’s not how it works.” Ashley had been being groomed for this job for a year by Kara Alderman. Talk about an entitled, pretentious bitch. Their friendship was ultimately one of the things that led to us breaking up. Kara changed her. She changed her bad.

“She sounds... really controlling.” Spencer had one of those moments where he obviously wanted to say something else, but tried to do the nice thing and keep his comments to himself. I wouldn’t exactly have been mad if he had said something a bit more inflammatory. It’s not like I haven’t thought the same things before. “Do you still love her?”

I took a deep breath and prepared for him to tell me to leave and never come back. “Yes. I love her so much. Even though sometimes she makes me feel bad about myself, she still means so much to me.” I reached over and held his hand. “But not enough to want to go back to her. I want to be with you.”

I felt filthy just saying it. Here I was, hopelessly in love with someone I had considered spending my entire life with, despite her flaws, and I was half-naked in bed with a guy I’d only considered being with a few days prior as a way of making myself feel better. Beth may have done an awful thing, but I was the one that felt like the monster. I mean, I was the one who jumped to conclusions. I was the one who assumed she leaked the pictures. I ended the best thing that ever happened to me on a whim. I didn’t deserve her and I didn’t deserve Ashley and I didn’t deserve Spencer.

“You know what’s the worst part of it? We were talking about coming out to our parents and becoming official at school before everything went down.”

“Really?” he asked.

I nodded. “We were thinking about telling my dad when she came over to my house and then go to Homecoming together as a couple.” The idea brought back a surge of emotions I hadn’t felt in days. It felt like a dream.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Spencer asked. I thought he was talking about coming out, which was kind of pointless now, until he continued talking. “You know, you and me being together? I mean, you seem like you’re still really hurting. I just want to be absolutely sure you want to keep this going before things get too far. I don’t want you to do something you aren’t comfortable with. We don’t need to rush anything until you’re sure you’re ready.”

I wanted to scream at him. Tell him I didn’t know what I wanted and everything I ever cared about went away. I was nothing and I deserved to hurt. I dug this hole and now I need to bury myself in it. Remembering that night brought me nothing but dread. Thinking about that assembly made me feel paranoid and sad and angry. I abandoned the two people I’d loved more than life itself because I couldn’t stand the heat. I left them when they needed me most. I threw it all away. My biggest fear was losing them and it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nothing on earth would make me feel better. Nothing could

keep me from staring at the ceiling at midnight, dreading waking up in the morning because it meant I had to live another day. I wanted to tell him that some days the pain was so bad that I wanted to die.

Instead of all of that, I decided I was ready.

“I am *done* with Beth. I want you. I’ve always wanted you. And I want you to know that I’m ready. I want this.

He had a few condoms hidden in his drawer. We had sex. It was my first time with a boy. His shoulder and leg made it kinda difficult, but we took it slow and it was over pretty fast because he was in some pain. I was, too. I think he told me he was falling in love with me. I can’t remember. I cried afterward.

## **MEMORIES IV**

## Beth

Even though neither of us particularly cared for going to the football games and spending our Friday nights with the people we absolutely hated, Grace and I somehow found ourselves in the scorching hot bleachers once a week, forced to inhale the body odor of our peers that had been pre-gaming since third period algebra class. We cracked jokes and took the whole thing in stride. The whole reason we went was because the alternative was sitting in her room while she smoked weed and I coughed every time she exhaled. There was time for that later. It was all in good, ironic fun.

Grace told me war stories of her on-going feud with Kara Alderman and her cronies when they ran out onto the field to do their little half-time routine to a mashup of Katy Perry, Ke\$ha, and more forms of electronic dance music I assume got equal levels of airtime at the local whorehouse. I assumed Kara was prepping for her future job. I sat there, water bottle in hand, and took in every detail with unabashed awe. As childish as it was, there's nothing I love more than a good prank war.

Kara Alderman ruled the school with an iron fist. Charles Bruxton might have been the most popular guy in the whole county, but Kara was the unquestioned head of the student body. The real Queen Bee. All but untouchable. No one dared oppose her for fear of making an enemy of a demigod. Even Principal Patrick was rumored to live in fear of her.

No one dared openly defy her except for Grace Carlisle.

Grace and Kara's little feud began during their first year of school together. Kara ruled their middle school even more viciously than she did our high school. She was openly hostile with people she disliked, had the guys harass the girls that annoyed her during recess, threw food in people's faces during lunch, the whole nine yards.

"Petty, stupid, cunt bullshit." was the phrase Grace used to describe her behavior.

The thing about Grace is how she gave zero shits about the status quo. All the other little girls wore short skirts and belly shirts and had their navels pierced before they even turned fourteen, Grace was the polar opposite. Cutup jeans, lots of mascara, and a general "I Don't Give A Fuck" demeanor that was a stark contrast to how things had been among this class of kids. The most unconventional beauty this school had ever seen. Grace was the outsider who was joining them for a single year before they moved on to high school. Why would anyone care about her?

As it turns out, a pretty face that hadn't grown up with the same people for years and years actually does turn heads. After just a week, Grace had been approached by six different guys who wanted to get her number or hang out sometime. Grace had known who she was for her entire life and had no interest in any of them, but she did think one or two were sweethearts that just needed to meet the right girl so their lives weren't ruined by someone who exploits them.

"They were shaking when they asked me," Grace told me one night, smiling. "They were like sad little puppies. I hope they're doing well."

Enter Kara Alderman.

Seemingly overnight, Kara wasn't the topic of all discussion. Oh, Kara got a new purse and a new skirt? Who cares about that? Check this out, did you hear that this Grace girl might be going out with Jeremy Stoneman? Did you know Grace's dad was a producer for Nirvana? She is from Seattle, after all. I heard she's auditioning to be a model for Teen Vogue.

This new girl dared try to replace Kara in her home territory? Not on her fucking life.

"It started off small," Grace said. "Calling me names. Tearing up a book I borrowed from the library and forcing me to buy it after I *ruined it*. Get this, this one time she shoved me really hard during a

basketball game we played in gym class and I landed weird and broke my finger. But I was so fucking mad, I got back up and punched her as hard as I could in the nose.”

“Oh my God!” I exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear.

“And she was screaming and screaming and crying and then her nose started gushing out blood, shit it was a mess. And I’m just wailing on her because I was fed up with her bullshit and the teacher runs over and gets between us. If she didn’t, I was going to rip a chunk of her hair out of her head and make her eat it. I almost had her in a headlock at one point.”

“Did you get in trouble?”

“Ehh... not really? I mean, I got suspended for a couple days for fighting. When her dad showed up, he tried to have me expelled. My parents wanted to murder him for enabling her so much. But when a few people from gym who actually like me came forward and all said that Kara started it, Kara got a suspension, too. And then after that, it just kinda got dropped. Kara left me alone and I got moved to another gym class.”

I was elated. Knowing that little asshole got exactly what she deserved was delicious. “So what changed? Why are you at each other’s throats again?”

“She started leaving me alone,” Grace explained, “but that doesn’t mean she didn’t do everything she could to make my life miserable. When she realized that openly being an asshole wasn’t the way to ruin my life, she started acting a lot more sneaky. It was some real Mean Girls bullshit. She started to spread rumors that I was giving blowjobs to boys from the other schools because I got a really bad cold sore. Which obviously means I got chlamydia, right? And then a bunch of guys started asking me if I would suck their dicks in the bathroom and I had to keep telling them to fuck off. Then the rumors that I was having sex for money in people’s cars came out and teachers began pulling me aside and interrogating me like I was a criminal or something. God, I wanted to skin her alive for that. My family got weekly calls from the administration to see if they knew about their whore daughter.”

I didn’t know what else to do except hold her hands. “I am so sorry.”

She smiled a little. “Hey, don’t worry about me. Fuck her, right?”

I knew she was trying to be strong, but I could tell she was still hurting over it. I couldn’t blame her. What kind of monster does things like that? Ruining someone’s life because you don’t like them is disgusting. I swore to myself that I would help Grace in whatever way I could to stop Kara and bring her down a few pegs.

## Ashley

People like to talk. People spread rumors and talk trash from the comfort of their own homes or cars or social media under an anonymous name and think they're safe from consequences. Kara was a victim who had been bullied for years by people that couldn't accept that she was on top and they were below. It was the social order. Without that order, Arlington City High would fall apart and society as we know it would crumble to dust.

The thing about Kara Alderman is she was a goddess. A rock star. She oversaw the school better than anyone in the faculty and made sure people stayed in line. When I joined the cheerleaders before I began my Freshman year, I heard that she got one of the Senior guys expelled after he tried fucking one of the Freshman girls on the squad at a party.

When I quietly confronted her about it a few months into my Freshman year, she didn't just admit that she did it. She bragged about it. "Elliot Knight was a piece of shit and I'd been looking for a reason to bury him for years. If he wants to stick his dick in Freshman girls, he can go fuck himself while he's rotting in prison."

I had never been more attracted to someone before in my life after hearing her speak so confidently. I hadn't begun dating Lauren yet so I guess she was my first real crush? But it wasn't just a physical attraction to her. It was what she represented. What I instantly felt for Kara after one real conversation wasn't a romantic love, but rather intense levels of respect and adoration. She was everything I craved to be. The power, the status, the body, the cunning.

Fuck.

After speaking to her, I began to reevaluate my place in the Freshman class. High school is the time when any kid can reinvent themselves. I had Casey and Heather and Michelle, but most of us were just learning how to be teenagers. I realized that the only way to become like Kara was to *become* Kara. So I changed myself seemingly overnight. New clothes, new jewelry, a new attitude. I had become chummy with a few of the guys that would go on to join and eventually run the A.V. Club, but I knew I'd need to leave them behind. I may like film, but black and white movies don't make you popular. I molded myself the way Kara would have wanted. Even though I was only a Freshman, I would gain her respect. Whatever it took.

Before we got changed into the clothes we wore for practice, Kara spotted me as she and her friends walked into the gym. As one of the three Freshman who actually made the squad, Lauren included, I knew I wasn't on her radar. But she walked up to me, gave me a once over, and said, "I like your outfit." before turning back to her friends and walking away.

I almost squealed like a pig with excitement.

After that, things seemed to change. Kara would ask me about my day once a week. People in my grade began to look at me differently. Casey and Heather took on a more supportive role in our friendship, recognizing that I was quickly ascending the ranks and wanted to have a place at my side. Teachers who normally saw Freshman as nothing more than gutter trash were kinder to me and offered me chances to earn extra credit that they didn't offer to my classmates. Things really seemed to be looking up.

Between my Freshman and Sophomore years, Kara had won Prom Queen for the first time and began her quest to become a University of Florida cheerleader. She had made three trips to the campus and got close with the girls who would be her squadmates after she graduated from here. She regaled us with stories of them partying all night long on the beaches and how she could have hooked up with any



guy she wanted. We could only be in awe of her. I knew I wasn't interested in hooking up with Florida guys, but the thought of the girls she was hanging out with made me weak.

Something else that changed was how Kara treated me. Before I became a Sophomore, she never really paid me much attention. I kept quiet during team meetings and dinners and stuff. I didn't go to the post-game parties because I didn't have any interest in drinking yet. I knew it was for the best that I kept my head down so she wouldn't have a reason to hate me. But now that I was a Sophomore, she seemed to take notice of me. She would text me a few times per day, maybe a phone call once per week. She asked me to sit closer to her during team dinners and even once got me involved in a conversation about movies we could watch for a group screening. She'd heard I was a film buff and wanted my input. I could have offered them a hundred Oscar-worthy classics, but instead stuck with something more digestible by the people in the audience. When we all went over to Kara's house and sat down in our PJs to watch *Legally Blonde*, she let me sit beside her. She gave me a smile when the credits rolled.

After that, things really changed. Kara asked me to sit with her when we had lunch together, even letting me sit in a seat beside her. It was amazing having upperclassmen looking *up* to me despite only barely being a Sophomore. I got to talk more and developed the personality I would adopt for the rest of the year. Someone who gave no fucks and owned the room whenever she walked in. Kara absolutely adored me for this.

Early on the Saturday morning two weeks before Homecoming, Kara asked me to come over to her place to talk. Alone. I all but ran over to see what was going on. She'd ever asked me to hang out alone before. I thought this was my chance to earn her respect forever.

When I arrived, she offered me some wine. Even though I wasn't interested, I couldn't refuse. I needed her to like me. We downed half a bottle before noon. It was the most bubbly I'd ever felt in my life. Lauren was the only girl that made me feel this kind of way, though we weren't ready to start dating just yet.

After she poured us each another glass, she asked a question that changed my life forever. "Who do you think is going to run the cheerleaders next year when I'm gone?"

I answered honestly. "I'm guessing it's going to be Stacey or Elena or maybe Brooke. Lauren could do absolutely do it, but she told me she might be sticking with volleyball next year so she can get a scholarship."

She listened to my opinions, nodding slowly with each explanation. After I finished, she continued. "I'd been thinking about Stacey for a while. And Lauren. But I've been thinking about someone else lately." She smiled. "You."

I never once thought this conversation was the lead-in to what she ended up suggesting. My reaction was genuine, which probably helped me in the long run. I didn't come off as insincere and try to make it seem like I knew what was coming. My mouth dropped open a little bit as I struggled to figure out what to say. "Wait... me? Really?"

"I know we haven't talked too much since you came to the school," she said, "but I really am starting to admire you. People really look up to you. The girls on the squad all really like you, too. They tell me about it and say nice things about you all of the time. You seem like you'll be able to handle things around here. This school needs a strong leader to keep things moving. There's too many assholes around here that need to be put in their place once and a while. Who else is possibly going to do it? Spencer? Charles really likes him, but he doesn't have the spine for this kinda thing. But I think *you* do."

I didn't know what to say. It was all happening so fast. I went from being the outcast that nobody outside of my class would even talk to being a potential Head Cheerleader in just a few months. I couldn't

wait to tell Casey and Heather and Michelle. Lauren was going to be ecstatic, too. My life was going to change for the better and I couldn't wait. Anxiety for the future, be damned. I wanted this as badly as I wanted anything.

“What do I have to do?”

## Spencer

One of our most important wins of the season came against the Plano Central High Diablos. They were fresh off of a conference championship the previous year and we managed to beat them 24-13. It was tough and I threw two picks, but everyone had my back and we pulled it off. And even though everyone was giving their all until the final whistle blew, nobody was more motivated to win the game than Charles. He was a machine out there. I knew from that game alone that he was going to the NFL one day and I couldn't wait to see him there.

The thing about Charles Bruxton is he was possibly the kindest and most considerate guy I've ever known. I honestly believe he could have run for President of the United States and won. He never would, though, because he made sure to never give anyone a reason to dislike him, save his ego. He always put the team first and evaded controversy like it was the plague. There was this one rumor that he never even tried to go to second base with Francesca Phelps, his girlfriend of two years, because he was terrified of getting her pregnant and unintentionally harming the team. He told us over and over that he planned on marrying her one day so he could wait for kids.

He mattered too much to him to risk it and he knew we needed him. I wouldn't blame the guy for fucking his girlfriend, but it was nice to know we mattered.

At the team lunch the next day, Charles waited until after we all ordered before standing to speak. It was kind of a tradition. He'd been named Captain the year prior and made sure to give these speeches after every game, regardless of the outcome. When some of the younger guys said how dumb they thought it was, me and Brad had them running hills after lunch was finished and we didn't stop until their meal was being sprayed over the pavement.

"So yesterday was rough," Charles said as the room quickly fell to pure silence and he got the respect he deserved. "And we didn't play our best. I made mistakes. Spencer made mistakes. Brad, Frank, Tom. At some point, everyone made a mistake. And that's okay. We're human. These things happen. We aren't perfect. Anyone who asks you to perfect one hundred percent of the time is the most imperfect person alive. Those mistakes *don't define us*. What matters is we came back from those mistakes and came together as. A. *Team*. Sure, Spencer threw two picks. So what? He still led us to score twenty-four points. I dropped an easy pass and nearly cost us a drive. So. *What?* I made up for it when it mattered. The point is... the point is mistakes happen and I really hope you aren't dwelling on them right now. The past is behind us. Those guys are good. They're *really fucking good*. They won the conference last season for a reason. Remember how they whipped our asses last year? They could have done it again and won the State Championship this year. But we *beat them*. I know we weren't perfect, but we got the job done. That's all that fuckin' matters, man. So..." He picked up his cup and held it high. "This one's for *us*. And when we're celebrating again after we win the Homecoming Game next week, we can remember that we deserve to let loose and party all weekend long because *WE ARE THE BEST FOOTBALL TEAM IN THE ENTIRE FUCKING COUNTRY!*"

The team erupted into applause when he finished. Charles was spitting all over the place and his drink was spilling over the rim of his cup and coke dripping down his hand and onto the table below him, but he didn't care. The restaurant belonged to him and the guys worshiped him like a god. Even I had gotten carried away in the moment and stood to high-five him. The guy was like the brother I'd never had. Encouraging, supportive, a real man. Frank is my best friend, but Charles was like my mentor. He's only two years older than I am, but you'd think he was a pro coming in to give a pep talk to his alma mater.

In most ways, he was. When the season was done and he was ready to announce his commitment, he'd be leaving us a few months early to join whatever major school he wished. He was a genuine five-star prospect that every school in the country was salivating over. In the meantime, though, he was just another kid at a major high school in Arlington, Texas. He had homework due every day, a girlfriend he had to make time for, a family he went home to after every practice, and an old car his parents could barely afford but broke the bank to get him so he could drive himself to practice and colleges for visits.

"I know you don't think you're going to be able to lead this team next year," he said to me as he gave me a ride back to my place after lunch was over. "But trust me, you have it in you to be a leader. You just need to push through the shyness and remember these guys are like your brothers. They'd *die* for you. You're the *quarterback*, man!"

One of my biggest fears was not being able to live up to the standard he had set. I never envisioned myself as a "leader of men" type that can just inspire people to do anything by giving some impassioned speech. I know that's kind of a requirement for any quarterback, but I was really trapped in my shell. Charles was the one who finally broke me out of it. He was one of the few people I could go to when I needed advice or support. Even if he was dealing with his own shit, he always made time for me.

Like I said, he was basically my older brother.

## Vinny

I'll never forget when it happened. That picture is imprinted in my mind and I still see it when I try to sleep at night. Victoria sitting on the edge of her bed, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her nails tearing cutting so deep into her palms that it drew blood. Her entire body shaking uncontrollably. All I could do was sit there. She asked me not to touch her, not to hold her, not to speak. She needed to know this was happening, but didn't want to ground herself. I was her boyfriend. It was my job to bear the load. To confirm that this nightmare wasn't just in her head and she was wide awake.

Victoria and I had been dating for almost a year at that point. Things started pretty slow after going to Snow Ball together as Freshman. Our parents had to drive us to the restaurants and the movie theaters. We both got death threats if we even thought about doing anything more than a goodnight kiss. We'd text and call each other every day until our phones died. It was all very childish. We figured things out as we went along. We didn't know how to be a couple.

Fast forward to Sophomore year and we learned what couples were supposed to do. Lots of kissing with tongue, flaunting each other to our friends, and, you guessed it, sexting. She was the first one to propose sending nudes and my horny little brain was all too happy to say yes. It's Victoria fucking Falco. So we did that for a few months before we decided to break up. We got kinda tired of each other and began to drift apart. I heard she found a new guy from Davy Crockett Prep a few weeks after we broke up and I was happy she was happy. But then she suddenly said she wanted to get back together and that she had broken things off with this guy. I had been really lonely and practically jumped at the chance to be with her again. We had sex as soon as the date was over. I told her I loved her after. She said she loved me. And it wasn't some line to get her to do it with me again. I really did love her. I still do.

Because of all the times we screwed around together, I was all but an expert at her body at that point and the naked pictures she made me look at were undoubtedly hers.

His name was Anthony Pagano. Anthony was much more of a meathead jock than I was and he didn't care about making his family proud or falling in love with a beautiful girl who deserves so much more than she's got. He only cared about what was between her legs than what was in her head.

Now that they were broken up, he had all of the pictures lying around in his phone that he had grown tired of. You can only jerk off to the same static image so many times before it loses its luster. When the calls and texts came in asking for more, she told him to fuck off. Big mistake. He decided to go through his contacts list and leak what he had to anyone at Arlington.

When it happened, Victoria called for me before anyone else. Not even Jasmine, who was basically her sister. When she called, I could barely understand her, she was crying so hard. I sprinted to my Dad's car and sped over to her place.

And I had to sit there and watch my girlfriend, the girl I loved more than life itself, sitting alone on her bed while she cried her eyes out. I wanted to cry, too. I felt so helpless.

The only thing I could dream of doing was ruining this guy's life. But not by going to the police. They would only drag things out and he could just deny sending it or find some loophole or God forbid demonize Victoria for sending the pictures in the first place. I knew the only way to handle this was to take matters into my own hands. If this guy was going to get what he deserved, I was going to be the one to do it. I owed it to her. My only regret is I got other people involved in it. This should have been my fight and my fight alone.

## Beth

Things started off innocently enough. Dinner and a movie. It was the most cliché afternoon ever. This shouldn't have been something that anyone would write home about. But Grace had a way of making things special. She could turn any run-of-the-mill date into a once-in-a-lifetime experience I would never forget. She was like my own personal brand of heroin. After just one hit, I was absolutely hooked.

Neither of us asked the other one out after we kissed for the first time. I was scared to make the first move because I knew once I did, it became real. It wasn't a silly romcom-grade fantasy I could fall asleep thinking about anymore. But I needed to do it. I was falling hard for her and I wanted to see if this was legit. After two days of sitting on it, I decided to ask her out.

We ate lunch outside to get away from everyone. Sweat was trickling down my back and it wasn't from the overpowering Texas sun. I was beating myself up for wearing my hoodie in the middle of fucking August, but I had to. Things had been kinda rough the past couple days.

I swallowed hard and quietly cleared my throat so the words wouldn't catch in my windpipe. "Hey, Grace. Listen, uh, I was wondering something. Were you, um... doing... anything... this Saturday? Cause if you weren't, I was wondering if, you know... we could... do... something..."

*Nice job, asshole.*

She only grinned and asked, "What took you so long? I thought I was going to have ask you myself if you didn't hurry the fuck up."

Did I worry that we were rushing it? Yes, one thousand percent. I mean, we barely knew each other and here we were getting dinner together. She insisted on going to this Greek place downtown. Apparently it's owned by the parents of this one guy at school who she is really cool with and she tries to go there whenever she can to help them out.

"Aren't you worried someone will see us?" I asked nervously as we approached the building.

She laughed. "Why would anyone care about *us*? We're not Charles or Kara or even that Spencer dork. We're practically invisible. And even if someone did, we're just *a couple a' besties* getting dinner together on a Saturday. There's nothing wrong with that. Don't be so scared. I'm here for you."

She wasn't wrong. I knew almost nobody at school knew my name, let alone who I spent my free time with. But I was still new and was terrified about being made into a laughing stock. Not that spending time with Grace would do that, of course. She was the most punk rock "Eat Shit and Fuck The World" girl I'd ever met. Even the people who didn't like her couldn't exactly do anything to hurt her. She brushed off their insults and hit them back even harder. It was honestly inspiring for little timid me.

It was my first date. Like ever. I could barely hold my glass of water, but I damn if I didn't down glass after glass to try and quell my nervousness. It's a weird tick I have to deal with being anxious around people. I subconsciously worry about having a dry mouth and slurring my words so I need to keep drinking water after I speak with someone. Even if I'm not exactly thirsty, I still drink. I'm pretty sure I went through three glasses before our appetizer even showed up.

"You're gonna be a fish tank by the end of the day if you keep drinking like that," she joked. I could only give a nervous little chuckle in response before quickly taking a sip. She seemed to catch on to what was happening and lowered her voice, offering me a small understanding smile. "Hey, it's okay if you're nervous. I'm not gonna stop talking to you if today doesn't go absolutely perfectly or anything. You're really cool and I'm glad you're my friend. Plus the kissing was really fun and you're really good at it." She winked. I quietly screamed.

Hearing her of all people call me cool could have been the biggest joke ever. If I wasn't absolutely sure that she liked me back, I'd have assumed this was some elaborate prank. I half-expected to look across the restaurant and see a table full of the cheerleaders who shoved me into the trash cans in the cafeteria just sitting there, laughing at the stupid idiot getting her hopes up that she could ever be loved. But when I pretended to scratch my neck and turned my head, there was nobody there.

This was happening. I was on an actual date with Grace Carlisle and she was into me.

"You look really pretty!" I blurted out quite literally out of nowhere. I wanted to bury my head in my hands. I practically screamed it at her. God, what was wrong with me?

Hearing her laugh again was the best thing that could have happened to me. "Well, thank you! You're not so bad yourself." I felt her shoe brush my mine and she played a little game of footsie with me in an attempt to settle me down. She really was going above and beyond to make me feel comfortable. I'd never been so happy in my life.

After the date was over, I really thought that we were going to kiss. The setting sun was hitting her just right and my heart was singing like a choir. She leaned in, but avoided my lips and turned toward my ear and whispered, "I don't kiss on the first date. Let's do this again and you can figure out my rule for second ones." I practically melted when she said that. Next Saturday couldn't come soon enough. The week went by so slowly, I nearly died.

Sure enough, we had our first *official* kiss back at my place after she and I went to the lake and spent the whole afternoon together. It was hot and I was sweaty and tired after sitting in the sun all day, but none of that mattered when her lips pressed against mine. She wasn't the type to cover herself in makeup or anything, but she did put on some lipgloss for the occasion and my mouth tasted like cherry. It was the most delicious. I was desperate for more. But she had a policy of only one kiss per date until we were officially official so I was left dizzy and smiling like a madwoman when she shut my front door for me.

She asked me to be her girlfriend after date number three.

I thought things were actually looking up for me for a while. I had the coolest girlfriend possible, I was going through a period of not being bullied too too badly at school, homework wasn't as terrible as it could be, and I was able to catch up on some sleep. I even felt confident enough to start wearing short sleeves to school again, though it would be a few days before I actually went through with it.

Life was looking good.

## Lauren

Even though we didn't make it official until after Homecoming, Ashley and I began hanging out more and more in a "more-than-friends" context. I really wanted to believe there was a spark and kinda kept pushing to get it to light. She had become extremely busy with cheerleading and being Kara's friend so I kinda had to take a back seat as a result. Given how difficult Sophomore year was shaping up to be, it was probably for the best.

When we did get time together, though, we discussed everything we could think of that didn't relate to school. How our summers went, what concerts we saw, where we liked to eat, our favorite vacation destinations, where we were thinking about going to college. It felt like I was getting to know a whole different person. She wasn't some vain, vapid stereotype who only cared about boys and makeup and popularity, despite how some people wanted to paint her.

I was falling in love before I even knew it.

I think the thing that drew me in for the first time was seeing her at Charles' "End of Summer Bonanza" that was exactly what it sounds like: a cowboy-themed end of the summer party. He really needed to hire an event planner. The guys walked around the house bowlegged in with leather vests and big stetson hats. One nerdy Junior even brought a real pistol and he was calmly escorted out before he could get someone killed. Most of the girls didn't get the memo and decided to just show up in bikinis. I didn't get that memo either so I was stuck in a t-shirt and jeans.

We drank and talked and danced and did normal party shit. When I went out back to get some air, I saw Ash sitting there alone on this little stone wall. I still don't know why I approached her, but I don't regret doing it.

"Whatcha thinking about?"

She snapped back to reality and quickly stumbled through an answer. "Oh, nothing, just... I can't believe the summer is already over."

"It went by too fast," I complained. And it did. Three months isn't enough of a decompression from that hellhole. "Can you believe we're already Sophomores?"

"It's crazy, huh?"

"And now we're not the losers anymore! We can pick on whatever Freshies we want!" I could tell that something was off when she barely laughed. "Hey, are you okay?"

"I don't like parties," she admitted. "I'm only here 'cause..." She nodded her head at the swimming pool. Kara Alderman was struggling to keep her extremely tight bikini top on as she sat atop Tom's shoulders and tried to knock Stacey Milner off of Charles' shoulders. Everyone was splashing around, laughing. Ashley couldn't be more out of place if she tried.

"Hey, forget them," I said. "Let's go hang out someplace else."

She finally smiled. "Yeah. I'd like that."

We ended up spending the night together at her place. Nothing happened, though. But being so close to her just kinda lit that spark in me. I was dying to see if she was actually interested in someone like me. I wouldn't have the courage to ask for a while, though. In the meantime, I was resigned to wait and see. At the very least, I'd made a new friend. A real friend.



## Tracy

*“Damien isn’t a bad guy if you give him a chance. He’s just a little misunderstood. Just hang out with him once and you’ll see he’s cool. Trust me, the shit people say about him is totally blown out of proportion. So what if he wears black shirts and a trench coat. What is this? 1999? Who cares about that kinda shit anymore? Here’s his number. Talk to him.”*

I forget the name of the guy who ended up setting me and Damien up. We didn’t speak for the rest of our time together in high school because he got busted for selling weed out of the back of his family’s trailer. But that conversation ended up being one of the most influential of my life because it was what ended up getting me and Damien together.

As dumb as it is to actually admit, I was kinda really into the whole bad boy thing he had going on. He wasn’t some big roid monkey on the football team who went around shoving the gay kids into lockers or some stuck up rich kid who made sure people knew his family had money. I guess it was the “J.D. from *Heathers* effect.” He was mysterious and didn’t give a shit what people said about him. Like seriously did not give a shit. I envied that.

Even though I managed to get a spot on Student Council, nobody there actually knew my name. I didn’t have any real friends. My brother was one talk with an undercover cop away from being thrown in prison. I had a 3.8 GPA, but nobody really cared about grades outside of the absolute smartest kids in school that thought the rest of us were a bunch of plebeian assholes destined to sell them cheap wine at a supermarket.

Knowing that a guy liked me made me feel special. Wanted. Even if the guy was a total criminal, it still made me happy to feel desired by *someone*.

The thing about Damien Wells is he wears the persona he wants to show the world like a brand new pair of shoes. He just doesn’t care what people think. He judges them and thinks everyone around him is a pretentious asshole, but he doesn’t take what they say about him to heart. When he first got the rep of being the weird kid who sat in the back of the class and wore black shirts every couple of days, he tripled down and only wore shirts for metal bands I doubt the most metal of metalheads had even heard of. When people heard he was trying to hit on Elena Acevedo— one of the most popular girls in school—the football players teased the shit out of him. So for Valentine’s Day, he bought her a big bouquet of flowers and asked her out right in front of Brad Kendrick’s locker. They were dating at the time and everyone knew she wanted to break up with him. Brad knocked him out cold. Damien said it was totally worth it, though.

And when people heard about the time he sold an old English paper to a Freshman for twenty bucks, he got the reputation of being the guy who ran a little black market in the hallways between classes.

He first heard about it when we were making out in his room. I was so ready to finally lose my virginity and I knew it was going to happen, but he got a phone call from his buddy, Shawn, and he started laughing and laughing and laughing.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, my blood starting to cool and every reservation I ever had about getting naked in front of someone rushing back into my head now that the adrenaline had passed.

“It’s Shawn,” he said, laughing like an idiot. “He says... people think I’m some kinda smuggler or something now ’cause I sold that dweeby kid my old Lord of the Flies paper. Fuck, I got a D+ on it, but he was so desperate that he actually gave me his entire week’s lunch money for it. Now some Sophomore is asking for my notes for his Fahrenheit essay.”

Even though he was laughing, I could tell an idea was starting to take root. It's like that look you see in the eyes of someone who is about to buy something ridiculously expensive just for them, but is really on the fence about it. The desire burns bright on their face and they know they want it, even though that money was supposed to be for dinner for their wife or tuition for their kid's school. Damien knew there was money to be made and he sat there for a long time. Thinking.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Huh? Yeah. Never better," he said. "You get good grades, right?"

"Um... yeah...?" I was dreading where this was going. It didn't take a genius to know I was about to be roped into something really, really wrong.

"How'd you like to make some serious money with me?"

Normally I'd be enraged that someone wanted me to sell them my hard work and risk getting me expelled for helping someone plagiarize their paper, but he kept selling the idea to me and it actually started to make sense.

"You wouldn't need to do any of the hard work. All you'd need to do is come up with some half-finished papers with bullet points and a few sources and we'd tell them they can buy it as is for half price or we can give them a finished version for triple the cost of the version they'd finish themselves. That way we only need to risk it for the people willing to pay *and* we can pick and choose how much we copy and how much we come up with on our own." He then flashed a little key he had hidden in his drawer. "And I just so happen to have the master key to every one of the filing cabinets in the school. I may or may not have been saving it for when I needed answers to a midterm."

"You're insane," I said, despite the plan actually making a lot of sense. "And we're gonna get expelled."

"Only if we're lazy and get caught. And I don't plan on getting caught."

He started to run his hand up and down my legs and stomach and chest. He promised that we'd only do it for a little while and nobody would know I was involved. When he played the card that we could get out of this shithole city and go somewhere far away, I was putty in his hands. I told him before that I hated my home and had plans to leave and never come back. He knew exactly what to say to make me fuck him and it worked like a charm.

"We're gonna be rich, baby," he said as he undid my bra and saw something no boy ever saw before. "You'll never have to see your house again. You and me forever. I love you."

I knew he was just using me, but I was sad and lonely and I hated being a virgin. All the popular girls mocked anyone they even remotely suspected weren't getting laid. At least now I wouldn't hurt when that little bitch Ashley Williams made fun of me in the bathrooms. It was really funny. I had a boyfriend I was fucking on the regular and she couldn't even get a date to Homecoming.

"Say you want this."

"I want this."

He smiled and we did it.

We played it safe at the start to test the waters and make sure the system worked. Old tests that the teachers never changed the answers to were the hot commodity. Everyone in those classes paid top dollar for a ten minute window to view them from our special spot in the back of the library in this one little tutoring room where some guy got caught giving some lucky lady head once. They could never take the tests home or take pictures, though. We had to maintain complete control of them so they wouldn't give them out like candy to their buddies. Damien said that it meant people would keep coming back and they wouldn't be turned in to the faculty if someone decided to snitch on us. Not that anyone ever would,

though. Damien kept a log of everyone that ever visited him so in the event of him being caught and expelled, he could have his buddies ruin their life by telling everyone why they lost their one chance at a passing grade.

Of course, we branched out to other things. When the school was forced to crack down even more on the sale of junk foods thanks to the Michelle Obama healthy eating bill from when we were in grade school, Damien became the savior of the school for smuggling in hundreds of candy bars, dozens of bags of chips, enough bottles of soda to fill the Pacific Ocean, and pretty much anything anyone could think of to scratch that itch that only some calorie-filled garbage can truly scratch. This is what got him in trouble for the first time. Our dear leader, Principal Patrick, sat him down and ordered him to return all of the money he made selling the food and turn in anything he had on him at the time. Unfortunately for Mr. Patrick, I was working in the front office that day and tipped Damien off that there was going to be a raid on his locker. We lost a hundred bucks and a few bags of chips as a small payment to make it seem like we got busted, and that our operation was much smaller than it really was, but the rest was hidden in the weight room until the coast was clear.

We were back to selling food out of the back of his little truck the next Monday. We made a thousand dollars in less than a week.

The issue of this being a two man job came up shortly after his meeting with Patrick. I told him that as long as Patrick had his eye on him, we were running on borrowed time and he couldn't be the one doing the sales anymore. Damien knew I'd never be the one doing the actual transactions so he suggested we bring in some outside help. As much as I hated the idea of someone else being involved that I didn't know, I knew it was best.

Danny was our first "salesman" and he was pretty good at it. He was one of Damien's metalhead buddies and he was aching for some money for concerts. Then we got a few more guys. Erik, Ken, Omar, Keith and Keith. At the height of our operation, we had about a dozen guys working for us.

We then created what Damien called "The Tree System" as a replacement for meeting up in the library. When the library is full of people who are coming and going, the librarian and teachers get suspicious. So, instead, he came up with an entirely new way of doing things. Damien would use study halls and lunch breaks as an excuse for either him or one of his guys to go out to his car. Anyone who wanted to buy from him would meet up with whoever was stationed at the big tree outside of the school. They'd ask for whatever and the guy would call for someone to come over, vet the guy a bit to see what he wanted, and decide if he could have it. They'd pick it up, bring it back, take the money, and then reset for the next person. Damien could still oversee everything while not technically being connected to what was going on and there was an added system of security to everything.

Does this sound complicated and extremely dangerous? Absolutely.

Did I need this money more than anything in the world? Yes.

Was I willing to risk being expelled or even sent to prison to get this money so I wouldn't end up like my older brother? Abso-fucking-lutely yes.

This was when we expanded to the world of selling essays that I worked on. Even though I was really worried about selling entire papers that I had written, I made sure to never use more than two of the same sources on any one essay. The bullet point versions of the papers did help a lot. They were more or less "fill in the blank" essays for people who were also worried about being caught or just needed a spark to help them actually get going. I couldn't believe how much money we were making off of these things. When midterms and finals came around, we were making close to seven hundred dollars every day.

It was exhausting, but totally worth it.

After the guys got their smaller cut of the profits, Damien and I took the lions' share. A small portion went to Kara Alderman and her little band of assholes, but it didn't matter. They caught wind of what was going on and took a cut as "hush money" for not turning us in. We always shorted them whatever they expected and they were too smart to raise a stink about it if they suspected something was wrong. If they actually went to the principal, they wouldn't get any free money and we'd do whatever we could to get them expelled, too. It was a fair trade for some protection from anyone who would try to exploit us. We had Kara Alderman on our side. Even if she never met with us, we knew we had each others' backs.

I'd never seen so much money before in my life. I felt like a queen. I could afford new clothes and shoes and gas for my brother's car. Hell, I even managed to bail us out of not being able to pay the electric bill once or twice. I could buy albums from my favorite bands and posters of my favorite actors. Besides spending enough money to pay for a semester of college, my love life was going amazing. Damien got me a necklace that was worth two hundred bucks on a whim. We were having sex every chance we got. We even made plans for him to take a gap year so we could go to college together.

I like to think that if this had kept going the way it was, I could have left high school with enough money to get an apartment in another state and not have to worry about money until after I graduated, but it was never going to last. Every criminal has the moment where things fall apart for them. Even though things were going great, it all changed when Damien whispered something in my ear after we finished having our fun at my place. I hated bringing people over to my place, but he insisted. I can't help but wonder if he planned this all out ahead of time.

"Your brother sells some stuff, too, right? Does he sell oxy? Could you get me a bottle?"

Instead of protesting, I walked to the vent where he had his hidden stash and took out a bottle. I knew it was wrong, but part of me was curious. That evil little voice that wanted to taste the forbidden fruit. It got its wish when I decided to date Damien. What's the harm in one little pill? One more little high?

Instead of getting wasted together, he shoved it in his coat pocket.

"I know somebody who's been dying to get their hands on these things. Whatever they cost your brother to get, I'll double it. Trust me."

"Who is it?"

He waved his hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it. Let me handle this."

I should have taken them back right away. Instead of being responsible, I was becoming an accomplice in dealing drugs. We'd never made this part of the deal. But I was young and in love. I knew we'd make tons of cash off of that single bottle and I just needed the thrill of seeing a big fat wad of cash again. As long as I wasn't directly involved, it was okay.

God, I'm such a fucking idiot.

## Ashley

Over the summer, I'd finally gotten around to watching *The Sopranos*. Mob movies were something I'd really gotten into toward the end of Freshman year and this show is basically the grandson of every Mafia movie ever made. I mean, shit, they practically masturbate over *The Godfather* a dozen times over throughout the entire run of the show. My entire summer was spent doing three things: cheerleading, doing summer book reports, and watching the show. It was an obsession. I couldn't put it down. My mom practically had to drag me out of the house some days. Sure, it's extremely sexist and homophobic and glorifies a terrible side of American life, but it is just so well written.

Kara Alderman ran the school like a mob boss. She was in charge and everyone knew it. She was a teenage Tony Soprano. But with bigger boobs. Somehow.

After we had the talk about me potentially becoming Head Cheerleader, I'd begun to notice the little things. People would come to her at lunch and give her free food from their plates. They'd ask her to go with her to group dinners, tag along to the movies, double date mini-golfing. They'd ask her blessing to date certain guys or ask for her to put in a good word for them to the person they like in exchange for their lunch money or free English papers. Shit, one guy even offered to give her money for gas if she said they'd gone on a date one time. People paid her respect and she made sure they were taken care of. God help you if you crossed her, though.

A few days after I began sitting beside her at lunch, I'd gotten my first few well-wishers. One guy, Scotty Darnough, came up to me and said something like, "Hey Ash. Do you want my cheese fries? I'm too full to eat anymore and I don't want to throw them out."

I looked at the small paper bowl over and he hadn't even touched them. "Are you sure? I mean, thank you, but I don't want to take all your fries."

Kara spoke up for me. "Thank you, Scott, she'd love them." She motioned to the spot between us and he quickly placed them down, muttered a thank you and flashed a nervous-but-grateful smile, and hurried away. When he was gone, she plucked up a few and ate them. "You okay? Wait, are you lactose intolerant?"

"No, no, I just feel weird about taking food from people like that."

"Trust me, they *want* to do this," she said slowly.

Even though it was "okay" to accept gifts, I still felt... icky about it. Is icky the right word? I didn't want to take advantage of people. Not that Kara was doing anything wrong, but it sure didn't feel right. I stayed quiet for the rest of lunch and let her talk to the girls, who I could tell were whispering about me when they left to use the bathroom or get something else to eat.

Kara seemed to sense my conflicted feelings and asked to come over to my house to hang out. Of course I said yes. When we were alone in my room, she painted my nails and explained the situation to me. "When you're in charge, people will look at you differently, too. And it's okay to feel weird. I felt really weird about everyone treating me differently when I was being considered for the job during my Junior year, too. But when you see how lucky you have it and see that everyone wants to be your friend, it's not so bad."

"They hate me, don't they?" I asked. "The girls."

Kara scoffed. "Fuck 'em. They don't have what it takes to be in charge. They only want the perks that come with it. They can't take the heat. I mean, fuck, I love Stacey to death, but if I named her Head Cheerleader, you guys would be totally fucked. She's so callous." It was funny to hear her say that because she was so nice when I first joined the squad. "Not to mention she's a total whore. She's slept

with half the baseball team! I can't let *her* run the team! Even if she is my friend. If she gives you a tough time, tell her she'll just have to suck it up and deal with it.

"But she's also a Junior," I said. "Doesn't it seem right that a Senior be in charge? 'Cause, you know, four years of waiting and everything?"

"Who really cares how old someone is?" Kara asked. "You either *can* or you *can't* keep things running smoothly at that school. A Freshman could do it if they tried hard enough."

"Alright, what about... Brooke? She seems like she would be as good as anyone."

Kara rolled her eyes even harder than she had at Stacey. "Christ, kill me now if I had to settle for her."

"What's wrong with her?" I asked.

"She's too spineless and indecisive," Kara said. "Think about it. Anytime we talk about going to dinner, she always says she doesn't know what she wants to do and lets someone else decide for her. Same thing with dressing up for dances or if she should date a guy. I have to be her little Jiminy Cricket every time she has to make her mind up. Imagine if someone like *that* had to keep the peace around school."

That was when I asked the most important question I'd ever asked in my entire life. I needed to know the answer to this to get some context as to what made me so qualified to do this job and why it was so important.

"But why do I need to be the one to keep everyone in line? It's not that I don't want to, I just don't get why it has to be me."

She finished applying a coat of blood red nail polish on my ring finger.

"My sister, her name's Rachael, she was Head Cheerleader when she went here. You've never met her, though, she lives in Georgia now. I was only a Freshman and she was a Senior. She's so much nicer than I am, and everyone loved her. All of my friends got bullied like crazy by the upperclassmen, but I was off limits. Not because Rachael would retaliate or anything, though. It was only because everyone liked her that I got a free pass. But I knew what was really going on when I'd eat lunch with her and her friends. Everyone asked her for her makeup and clothes. They'd beg her to go out and do things with them. Sounds awesome, right? Everyone loves you. That's what everyone wants, whether they admit it or not.

"Then I'm walking through the halls and I hear them bashing her with their friends. Calling her a loser and saying she's as dumb as a rock. That was when I learned that people don't care about your friendship just because you're a nice person. They see niceness as weakness. They wouldn't care if Rach just dropped dead in the family room.

"They assumed that I was exactly like my sister and they wanted to make sure their brothers and sisters would have it easy if I eventually became Head Cheerleader. You know that saying about people being shepherds and sheep? I wasn't going to be some fucking sheep. I knew how this school worked. The basketball and football teams hate each other. Some kid is running a black fucking market out of the trunk of his car. You see at least one girl getting pregnant every year. You got those freaks who look like they're gonna grow up and bomb abortion clinics harassing the girls in the hallway. The rapes, the fights, the suicide attempts, it's all such a fucking mess around here. It's a fucking jungle."

She stopped to take a breath and make the point she'd been building up to. Every negative thought she'd ever had bottled up into one massive tidal wave.

"There needs to be a healthy balance around here. People need to be reminded of where things stand. We protect our own. The basketball and football guys can hate each other so long as they don't ruin

things for the rest of us. That freaky little emo kid can run his black market as long as *we* get our cut for not ratting him out. Without a strong hand pushing everything and everyone along, there's chaos and I'll be *damned* if I leave this school knowing that I didn't do everything I could to keep our people from getting hurt."

It took me an entire afternoon of reflecting on what she said before I realized she was right. High school is eat or be eaten. Nobody remembers five or ten years after you graduate so what's the point of even trying to be nice to people. Unless you're some goodie-two shoes that has a conscience or commits a felony, nothing you do now will matter. Kara could be the difference between someone being raped and the rapist going to jail. I wanted to be that kind of person, too. Someone people went to when the bad things happened and they needed help.

After we had this talk, I began to see the world for what it was. The people who kissed up to me didn't do it because they wanted to be my friend. They wanted to make sure I would show mercy when it was my turn. Some of the Seniors didn't care as much because they wouldn't need to deal with me. But the underclassmen? The Juniors? They knew what could happen.

So I started taking the cheese fries without hesitation. If someone asked to go shopping with me, I smiled sweetly and said I'd love to. When older guys and ugly guys tried to hit on me, I went straight to Kara and she sorted them out.

I never felt more powerful in my life. I sat at Kara's right hand, learning everyone's secrets and getting to know anyone and everyone who approached me. Kara asked me for advice more and more as September turned to October, earning the ire of the other girls at the table. I had become her second in command. If she was Michael Corleone or Tony Soprano, I was Tom Hagen or Silvio Dante. Her consigliere. Kara grew to respect me more and more every day. As long as I didn't do anything to fuck it up, I was all but guaranteed Head Cheerleader.

Besides the perks of my new job, things with Lauren were going great. Really great, actually. She came out to me when I went over to her house for dinner and she asked me if anything could ever happen between us. You'd think God himself opened up the clouds to give me this. The single hottest girl in school who I'd been gushing over for weeks wanted to be with me. We'd have our first official date the day after Homecoming.

Everything was fucking perfect. I still don't know how it all fell apart so quickly.

## Vinny

Just seeing how everyone treated Victoria in the hallways made me sick to my stomach. Nobody wanted to speak to her and the ones who did notice her quickly turned away to gossip with their friends. They knew she could see them, but they didn't care. They weren't going to go ask her if she was okay. Why should they? She was just an idiot who made a fool of herself by getting her nudes leaked.

Some of the guys asked if I was gonna stay with her. I didn't care that she sent the pictures to him. Sure, it felt weird to be the boyfriend of the girl who got her nudes leaked, but we weren't together at that point. Why would I be angry? It's not like she cheated on me or anything. Even if I was mad about it, I was a thousand times more furious that those assholes were treating her like shit.

Victoria could barely make it through first period without breaking down and crying. Even the teachers were looking at her sideways. She'd been spiraling the past few days. It was so demoralizing to see her sink so low and not being able to do anything about it. What could I do?

I went to her house uninvited that day after school with some flowers and a movie. When she finally answered the door after what seemed like an hour of waiting, calling, knocking, and waiting some more, she looked like shit. I thought she had just decided to get wasted or something, and I wouldn't blame her if she did, but I realized something was up when I got a closer look at her. She was slurring her words really bad, her eyes were bugging in and out of her head, and she was swaying around so badly that she had to catch herself on the door frame.

"Are... you okay?" I asked. I probably could have figured this out on my own.

She gave this cackling laugh. "You... really think I... I'm okay? I'm am...amazing!"

That was when it hit me. "Vic, you're high."

"Ding! Ding! Ding!" she chirped happily and clapped in my face.

"What is it? Weed?"

She lazily shook her head. "*Noooooooooooooope*. Guess again!"

It took me a second to think of what it could possibly be. Then I remembered she said something about having a minor surgery last year and feeling like she got hooked on the painkillers they gave her. "Pills?"

She gave me a double thumbs up and nearly fell over in the process. "You're so sm... smart. And so hot..." She tried to lumber towards me to give me a kiss, but I reached out to hold her back. "What? I love you so much. Come here..." She tried again, but I held her away. She was too zonked out to actually fight back. "Don't yo... don't you l-love me?"

"Let's get you to bed," I said as I gently led her inside. "You look like you need a nap."

"What? *Nooooooooo*... do you kn-know how much these..." She nearly fell asleep on the stairs and I had to catch her before she could fall. I thought I was about to get her killed or something. As I played her down in her bed and tucked her in, she kept speaking. "These cost so... so... much. I wanna enjoy... he said they were..."

"Victoria? Are you still awake?" She murmured a response. "Who sold you the pills?"



## Tracy

Sophomore Year was supposed to be My Year. Charles asked me to become Secretary on top of being my Class Rep. These people wouldn't normally give them the time of day and I came in personally recommended by Spencer. Now here I was in the room where it happens, as Aaron Burr might say, and nothing was happening.

It was only our second or third Student Council meeting of the year, but nobody could talk about governing. All the talk was on the newest scandal of the year: Victoria Falco's nudes. At this point, almost everyone in the school had seen them. Some absolute pieces of shit took it upon themselves to walk up to people, ask if they'd seen some video that was going around Twitter, and then show them naked pictures of a fifteen year old girl. Fucking creeps. Patrick said he was going to suspend anyone who did that and report them to the police.

"Why would anyone do this?" Spencer asked. He looked genuinely mortified that anyone was capable of doing something this terrible. I couldn't blame him. Victoria was such a nice girl. She deserved nothing but happiness. Fuck whoever did this to her.

"Because people are assholes," Kara said bluntly. "That's really all there is to it."

"Do you think it has something to do with the Homecoming Game?" Frank asked. "I mean, we do play them next week and—"

"Oh, Jesus Christ, Frank, it's not *always* about fucking football!" Kara exclaimed. "He's probably just some bitter little douchebag that wanted to ruin her life because she's dating Vinny. How does this affect you or the football team in any way?"

"Yeah, I seriously doubt this has anything to do with us," Charles admitted. "Kara's probably right."

"But we need to do something, right?" Spencer asked, looking between Kara and Charles for support. "I mean, we can't just sit here and do *nothing*."

"What can we do?" Kara asked. "It happened and now everyone is laughing at Victoria. All we can do is talk to her and be nice to her and stuff. If people really care about her, they'll be there for her." She shrugged. "But besides that, what else can we do?"

Charles sat forward to address the room. "Like I said before: Kara's right. All we can do is be there for her and try to ease the pain. I hate that we can't do more, but it is what it is." He sighed, turned to me, and asked, "So what's on the agenda for today?"

## Beth

The only thing anyone could talk about the entire week had been what was going on with Victoria. I'd never really talked to her so I didn't know her, but her friends were fighting like hell to get people to defend her. It wasn't working. No matter how much they argued that we as a school should do something to defend her, they only got laughed at and ignored. Jasmine Jackson, her best friend in the world, never left her side through the whole thing. I really admired her for doing that. If anything like that happened to Grace, I'd go to war with the world.

We were over at her place watching a movie and talking when the topic came up because she got a text from some guy saying they saw Victoria totally stoned at school. "God, why can't they just leave her alone?" Grace said angrily as she typed out a response. "They're just looking for reasons to laugh at her at this point. Who cares if she's high? She deserves a break."

That was when I decided to tell her about the incident with the nerdy kid that was going table by table showing off Victoria's nudes. Grace looked disgusted. "And I couldn't do anything to get away from it!" I exclaimed. "He just shoved his phone right in my face!" I held my phone out towards her to show exactly how close it was. "I felt sick afterward. It was so wrong."

Grace held my hand and assured me that it was going to be okay. "You know how that Jasmine girl in your grade is trying to get somebody to help her? I think we should do something."

I wasn't exactly an expert on revenge so I wasn't sure what to do. "Like what?"

"Shit, I don't know..." She thought it over for a second, then sighed and accepted the fact that we were kinda powerless here. "I don't know. It's just a nice thought. That we could actually help this girl out."

"I mean, it's not like we can't," I said. "But we barely know her and I have no idea who this guy is who sent out the pictures. What *can* we do?" It sucked to feel so powerless. That was when I decided to spitball an idea that I had floating around. It was a long shot, but it was better than nothing. "Why isn't that Kara girl doing anything?"

Grace looked at me with a thoroughly grossed out look on her face. "Why would *Kara* want to get involved in any of this?"

"I mean, doesn't she run the school?" I asked. "Wouldn't she want to look out for us and make sure we aren't getting pushed around by another school? Even if she is a little mean—"

She scoffed. "That's really an understatement, B. *She's fucking horrible*. You know how everyone acts Regina George like she's the meanest girl in any high school movie ever? Kara Alderman is a fucking witch. I've been putting up with her shit since we were in grade school and I'm fucking *done* with it. There's no way in hell she would ever stick up for Victoria. If she wanted to do something about it, the guy would be dead in a ditch somewhere already. If we want to help out Victoria, we're on our own. Kara won't do shit."

"Wow, you... really hate her, huh?" I asked, half-joking and half-serious because I'd never seen her have an outburst like that before. She was always cracking dark jokes and not listening to bullshit and not caring about anyone or anything anybody did because, in her own words, '*None of it matters after high school graduation.*' I knew she hated Grace, but she was never *this* aggressive about it.

She didn't respond and instead looked away to watch the movie. The rest of the evening got really awkward and I just kinda slipped out. She apologized over the phone when we got home and promised that when we went to dinner that Saturday for our weekly "friend-date-that-totally-isn't-a-date-no-matter-what-anyone-at-school-would-say-if-they-saw-us-hanging-

out-together-for-the-tenth-time-that-week” and she would make it up to me by buying. How could I be mad at her after doing something like that? It was still really shocking to see her so mad. I knew they had history, but I didn’t think she would be *that* angry about it.

## Ashley

"You heard about what's going on, right?" Kara asked me during the car ride back to my place. She drove this gorgeous white convertible at the time.

"With Victoria?" I asked. "Yeah, I do."

"This is why the school needs someone in charge," she said. "I would *never* allow something like this to happen to someone like Victoria. If I went to school with that creep, I'd crucify the fuckin' guy. This is why they need you next year. If there is even the remotest chances of this happening, you'll need to put a stop to it."

"It's so bullshit that Patrick and O'Reilly can't do our job for us," I said. "Keeping everyone in line, I mean."

"Oh, they do," she said with some confidence. "They just do it in their own way. *We* can't dish out official punishment, but they can. We, on the other hand, are the line in the sand between *our* form of punishment and *their* form of punishment. If you show them that you're as committed to running this place like I am, they'll basically look the other way with anything you do." She gave me a once over when we hit a red light. "It helps that you have great boobs. You should really wear something that shows them off more. Patrick would especially like that."

The thought of wearing more revealing clothing to make our Principal like me a little bit more made me gag. "God, never say that again, please." She laughed really hard at that. "He wouldn't really try to fuck me, would he?"

"No, God, no. Not if you don't want it, anyway. My sister told me stories about this one girl in her class. Jenny. Let's just say Jenny never got in trouble with him for a reason."

I gagged even harder. My stomach was actually rolling around in my stomach.

"So you promise you're committed to this?" she asked me. "Because whoever I choose for this job is going to need an entire year to be ready for it. You can't just coast by on good behavior and pretending to give a shit and expect to be handed the position at the end of the year like it was a free sandwich. You've gotta earn it. But I get it if it's too much responsibility for you to handle. Not everyone is cut out for this. I wouldn't judge you if you wanted to back out."

"No," I said as soon as she stopped talking. "I want this. I swear. I know lately I've sounded really indecisive and stuff, but... I get it now. Why you need to do what you do. And I want to do that, too. If I can help just one person not get hurt like Victoria was... shit, I don't know... it would be worth it."

She smiled and held my hand. "You're gonna make a great Head Cheerleader one day."

I don't know if it was because she was holding my hand or because she just admired my body, but I'd never wanted someone so badly in my life. I didn't even feel bad about me and Lauren. We weren't dating or anything. If I knew for certain whether she was into girls or not, I absolutely would have made a move on her. "Earn my job" and all of that bullshit.

Am I really that pathetic that I let a friend holding my hand and giving me a smile turn me into a giddy little mess? I'm so glad she didn't make a move. I'd have died if I ruined things with Lauren before they even started. It was still nice to hear I had nice boobs, though.

## Vinny

He was exactly where I thought he was going to be. Everyone who wanted to deal with him knew how to reach him. I still don't understand how Patrick and the others didn't know he was doing this kinda thing. Maybe they were getting paid off. Imagine being a guy in your 60's getting hush money from a sixteen year old kid selling oxy out of the back of his beat up Chevy.

After waiting by the tree for a few minutes, Damien walked out towards me with a smile on his face. Two of his goons waited by their cars, eying me up suspiciously. Damien gave me a warm handshake. "When they said Vinny Romano wanted to see me, I thought they were bullshitting me. If you're here to take my lunch money, you're out of luck. I already spent it."

"Shut the fuck up." It was so hard to stop myself from kicking his ass. "You know why I'm here."

His smile wavered a bit. "Uhh... no? Am I supposed to?"

That did it for me. I grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and gave him a hard shove into the tree. "Don't lie to me, you little shit! Why'd you sell *pills* to my *girlfriend*?"

I saw his guys make a move to rush over to break us up, but he motioned for them to stop. "Okay, okay, come on, let's talk this out." He began to gasp as I reached up to choke him. "I... I'm so-sorry." I choked him even harder. He was gagging at this point. "She... she as-asked m...me for the stron-gest thing I... had—"

"And you sold her *oxy*?! You little piece of shit, I should kill you right fuckin' now! What if she died?! Would you even *care*?!" He wasn't able to respond now. A bunch of people were staring now. I realized I was about to kill him so I let go. He slumped to the ground hard, gasping for air. As he regained his ability to focus, he glanced back up at me and looked mortified. "If you *ever* sell anything to her again, I won't be as nice. Do you understand me, you little cockroach?"

I stormed off as soon as he said yes. Part of me wanted to knock his lights out, but I knew that wouldn't solve anything. It would have felt good, though.

## Tracy

I watched the whole thing from Damien's truck. It was terrifying to see. I wanted to run out and break it up, but I couldn't let them see me. If word got back to Charles or Kara or Spencer that I was involved with Damien, I'd be off of Student Council faster than I can blink.

Damien dragged himself back into the truck, huffing and puffing. I looked at his throat and saw that it was bright red. He was going to have some awful bruises. Despite what happened, he was laughing. "Remind me never to try to fight Vinny. It's probably not going to go so well."

"Are you alright?" It was all I could think to say. It was a stupid thing to ask.

"Been better," he said as he checked his neck with his mirror. He groaned a little between his frantic gasps. "Damn, he really got me."

"Why didn't you tell me those pills were going to Victoria?!" I exclaimed. Of all the people to smuggle pills into the school for, why'd it have to be the girl who was already a laughing stock? I already felt nervous about us branching out into something like this, but selling to her was way out of line. Not to mention how hard it was to actually sneak them out of the house without my brother knowing about it. What kind of selfish asshole would do something like this? Not me. Never again. I swore I'd never be a part of that kind of thing ever again.

"Because I knew you'd say no and I wanted you to get your cut," he said. "If we didn't sell them to her, she'd just go to someone shady and buy from them."

"And we *aren't* shady?! We sold *oxy* out of the back of your car. At *school*!"

"At least we know what was in the pills we sold her," he countered. "Who knows what kinda shit might be mixed in with the shit she'd buy if she was desperate enough. You can at least sleep at night knowing we made sure she was taken care of."

"Spare me," I said. I quickly exited the truck and stormed off while he protested from the driver's seat. He knew better than to chase after me. He needed me on Student Council. He couldn't afford me getting caught dealing with him. I didn't care anymore. I was absolutely fuming.

## Beth

Things with Grace were great. Amazing, really. But that didn't make my days at school any better. As Homecoming got closer and closer, the bullying seemed to ramp up around the school. I didn't understand what happened. Things had been so good and I barely had a negative interaction with anyone. Then everyone just kinda started acting like assholes. I figured it was everyone being so excited over the Victoria scandal. Or maybe it was just a high school thing I would have to get used to.

I was walking down the main hallway and I saw the worst sight possible a few feet ahead of me. The guys on the football team liked to play catch before classes because of course they did. If I wanted to get to my locker and not be late to my next class, I had to endure going through them. My hope was that if I kept moving with the crowd, they'd leave me alone.

Brad spotted me and grinned. "*Woahhhh* look who it is!" He tapped Spencer on the chest. "Watch where you're throwing that thing. Don't want a repeat of last time."

It was all very eerily similar to the first time I literally ran into Spencer.

"Comin' to get that date?" one of the Senior guys asked. "Spencer's still single."

"Nah, she's too good for *him*," Frank mocked. "Too pretty for someone as ugly as this guy."

Spencer didn't speak up in my defense. That was when I decided he was like all the rest. Just another jock who liked it when girls got flustered around him.

"I'm still looking for a date to Homecoming if you want," Bruce White said with a creepy grin. "I'll pick you up at your place."

I felt my chest start tightening up as I lost the ability to breathe. I couldn't have an attack in front of them. I ran past them to get to the nearest girls' room. Their laughter continued to echo in my ears no matter how far I ran away from them.

Inside the relative safety of the bathroom, I set my books and purse on the unwashed floor and allowed myself to cry a little bit. I didn't care if I was going to get violently sick after picking my stuff back up. I deserve it. Given that all the stalls were closed, I figured I wouldn't be alone for long. But I couldn't just turn and run back into the hallway and search for a bathroom that wasn't totally packed. As long as my sobs were hushed, I'd be fine. Sadly for me, I only got a couple of tears out before I heard five stall doors open at once and their occupants exited in perfect unison like it was a dance routine. I quickly wiped my tears with the back of my sleeve, but I know for a fact that Lauren Bradshaw girl saw me through the reflection of the mirror.

The pack of populars consisted of the most prestigious girls my grade had to offer the school. Casey Harper and Heather Sinclair, the two besties that were practically joined at the hip. Michelle Wilson, arguably the most decent of the group that was actually going places in life. Lauren Bradshaw, the submissive enabler who allowed her best friend to be a massive asshole without ever standing up for herself. And then there was Ashley Williams, the leader of the pack. She'd been a bit stuck up and self-entitled at the start of the year, but I could tell that she was getting worse every day. She made a point of hip-checking me whenever she saw me anymore.

As they took up positions at the sinks beside me, Ashley saw me glaring at her through my red eyes. She narrowed her eyes and turned to face me. "Can I help you?"

"No, I'm fine, just... Please leave me alone today, Ashley," I pleaded. *You've been cutting me a break lately. Just let me have one more day of not hating myself.*

"Excuse me?" she demanded.

Hearing her attack me made me lose any confidence I had built up from telling her to leave me alone. “I just, um, I’m having a, uh, a really bad day, and um...”

“Uh, well, I uh, maybe I, uh—”

Casey and Heather instinctively began to laugh at me when their little blonde master commanded it. Michelle glanced at me through the mirror and seemed a bit disappointed in Ash, but didn’t say anything. Ashley wore a big smile on her face as though she had told the most inflicting joke possible.

“Come on, Ash, be nice,” Lauren scolded. “Leave her alone.”

“I’m just joking,” Ashley said. “She knows that. Right, Bethy?”

I wasn’t going to cry in front of them. I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction. I didn’t even stop to grab a paper towel or anything to dry my hands off. Once again, I left a group of popular people in my dust and their laughs pierced my heart as I sprinted away. I didn’t care if I was going to get in trouble for skipping my next class. It was worth being alone for a little while.



## Lauren

I didn't know what had gotten into Ash lately, but it was total bullshit. She was being a real asshole to people. I've never spoken to this Beth girl before, but she doesn't deserve to be treated like that. I was really falling hard for Ash and everything, but things like this make me wonder if she was worth committing to being with. She just kept laughing as Beth ran off in tears.

Ashley bent down and picked something up from the ground. "Looks like she forgot something." I glanced around the corner of the sink and saw a pile of books and her purse. She was such a wreck, she forgot to get her stuff.

"What is it? Prozac?" Casey asked with a little nasally laugh that never ceased to rub me the wrong way. She saved it for occasions when she wanted to show Ashley how badly she wanted to deepthroat her designer boots.

"Hey check it out," Heather said as she reached into the pile Ashley was now holding up. "She's reading Moby Dick."

"Who reads Moby Dick?" Michelle asked as she finished washing her hands, making sure she had no real influence on the conversation, one way or the other.

Ashley grinned. "You just *know* it's the only dick she's getting."

Casey and Heather laughed along with their little buddy, but I finally summoned the courage to say something. "Hey, come on now. Don't be mean."

"Oh, come on, it's just a joke, Laur," Ashley protested, thinking I was kidding. I probably could have been a bit more forceful when I tried to get her to stop. Ordering people around isn't exactly one of my hidden talents.

"I think she's gay," Casey declared.

"She said ten words to us and you just assume she's gay," Michelle said flatly. "Wow, Case."

"I *know* it," Casey promised.

"Oh, Christ," Michelle sighed. "How?"

It was this point that Ashley shot me a concerned look. We never discussed the sexuality of other people when we all hung out so the idea of a girl being gay was extremely weird for us. Michelle was very open about her having a bisexual sister so we knew she would have our backs if either of us came out to her. Neither of us knew how Casey or Heather really felt about that kinda thing, though, and considering the consensus in Texas is relatively not good... I shot Ash a look back that more or less tore her a new one for making this conversation actually happen.

"Accent is clearly east coast," Casey began. "My guess is she moved here from some place from somewhere in the New England area; New York, Massachusetts, Vermont. Someplace where she could be herself and had lots of friends like her. Now she's panicking on the inside because she came down here, probably because her parents moved for work, and thinks everyone is going to hate her for it if they find out. Texas is, like, really far away from New York."

"You should become, like, a psychic or something when you graduate," Michelle suggested, her condescension worn plain in her voice. "Maybe get yourself one of those public access shows and everything!"

If Casey realized she was being sarcastic, she didn't show it. She just smiled and felt like the smartest girl in the world. She's not an airhead by any means, but she could be extremely ignorant of the world around her. Heather was the same way. They complimented each other extremely well.

Ashley set the books on the edge of the sink and began to search through Beth's purse. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"Just looking," she casually said as she dug further in. She eventually pulled out a little wallet and opened it. She smiled and took a twenty dollar bill. "What have we got here?"

"Ash, come on, don't be a dick," Michelle said.

Ashley gave her an annoyed look. "Somebody left twenty bucks on the floor. It's not like I'm going to just leave it sitting there for someone else to take." She looked at me and grinned a little. "I think I got money for dinner tonight."

The idea of using stolen money to pay for our date made me sick. I shook my head and stormed out. "Grow up, Ash."

After second period was over, I was resolved to make things right. Beth was at her locker, eyes bright red, when I approached her. Thankfully she had her books and purse waiting inside the locker when I got there. At least they didn't throw it away. I gave her a gentle tap on the shoulder. She looked shocked to see me and I could tell she was preparing for more humiliation.

I extended my hand and awkwardly handed her a twenty. "Here. Take it." I tried to avoid eye contact because it would have made it even weirder for me.

She eyed my hand suspiciously. "What?"

"Somebody took your money. I wanted to make sure you got it back."

Her eyes went wide and she tore through her purse. When she realized someone stole her money, she deflated. I thought she was gonna cry again. She stared at the money in my hand and was about to grab it, but then she quickly pulled away. "Why are you doing this for me?"

I sighed. "Because what happened in there was bullshit and I'm not happy about it. And I'm sorry I didn't stick up for you. Just... please take it."

After thinking it over, she finally took the money and held it tight in her hands. "Thank you."

I kept my hand held out and half-smiled. "We've never actually spoken before. I'm Lauren."

She shook my hand and said, "Beth."

"We should hang out sometime."

"What? I mean... um... I don't think Ashley would like that very much and I really don't want to cause any trouble for you."

I rolled my eyes. "You know what? Fuck her. You seem nice and I really think you could use a friend right now. How about we get dinner this Saturday? My treat."

Even though I could tell she thought this was some elaborate prank, the prospect of actually making a friend around here must have been too enticing. The only person I ever saw her hang out with was Grace. She finally let her guard down and smiled. Maybe for the first time since she moved here.

"Okay!"

I was going to end up missing Kara's big party, but I didn't care. Ashley was going to be shitfaced and I didn't want to spend my day listening to her treating other people like shit. I really really liked Ash, but I didn't like that she had to become a major asshole to get people to take her seriously. That's not how you get respect from people. If I was going to go out on Saturday, it was going to be with someone who was worthy of my time.

## Beth

Grace laughed so hard that she started to spit a little bit. One of the droplets of spit hit me in the cheek. "I'm sorry, wait, you gotta go back a second," she said, trying to take deep breaths to stop laughing so hard. "She said *what* exactly?"

"She said she wanted to hang out this Saturday," I said.

"Lauren. Lauren *Bradshaw*." Grace emphasized her name with more vigor, ensuring she had the right girl. "Star volleyball player. Cheerleader."

"Why is this so funny to you?" I asked, genuinely hurt. Knowing that Grace didn't think I could hang out with someone as popular as her kinda stung. I deserved more friends, too.

She stopped laughing. "Babe, I'm not laughing at you. It's just such an obvious trick."

"What? How?"

"She's fucking Ashley, remember?" Grace asked. "Ashley Williams? Your bully? Ashley is Kara's little butt buddy and she's dead-set on ruining anyone's life that crosses her. She probably heard that we've been hanging out and wants to go after you for it."

"I don't know," I said, hesitant to believe that someone was capable of doing something like that. "She seems really nice. She even gave me back the money Ashley stole from me—"

"Wait, she stole from you?" Grace asked, her anger rising. I hated seeing her angry.

I never meant to tell her what happened, but I slipped up and now I had no other choice. "It's nothing serious, I swear, but I was in the bathroom and they cornered me and I left my books when I left to go cry and..." My eyes went wide when I realized I said what I did. "Shit..."

Grace became genuinely concerned and draped an arm over my shoulder. "What? Wait what happened why were you crying?"

"Forget about it," I said, turning away to face the TV.

"No, don't forget about it," Grace pressed. "Come on. It's *me*. Talk to me." She held my hands tight. "You know you can talk to me about anything, right?"

I nodded. And then I told her everything.

## Spencer

The Victoria Falco pictures spread through the locker room like wildfire. There wasn't a single guy that hadn't seen them within three days of the pictures being leaked. When I saw them, they were everything that was advertised and more. I never wanted to see them, though. It just happened. The first time I saw her passing by in the hallways after they leaked, it was like I forgot who she used to be. The sweet, sincere girl everyone liked that would happily become anyone's friend. All I saw now was a hot girl posing naked in front of her bathroom mirror. I'm pretty sure that was the case with every guy because she refused to look anyone in the eyes.

To say I felt guilty was an understatement. I should never have been in the position to see those pictures and nobody else should have either. She was really nice to me when we got to high school. I even asked Ashley and Frank and the rest if she and Jasmine could join our little friend group. We talked about it, but nothing ever came of it and I dropped the issue.

And when I overheard these two guys on the basketball team saying she was a whore, I absolutely lost my shit.

"What the fuck did you just say about her?!" I yelled as I pushed past Frank.

Their eyes went wide as I got right up in their faces. "Huh?"

"Say it again," I yelled. "I fucking dare you!"

Frank tried to pull me away from them as a crowd began to form around us, but I wasn't going anywhere. They weren't trying to fight back. I could smell the shit in their pants from somebody actually calling them out for being such wretched assholes.

Brad and Vinny ran up to us and quickly shoved us apart, ending our little confrontation before I got the chance to knock the one dude's lights out.

"Come on, man, *enough!*" Brad ordered as he was actually holding me back. I tried to lunge at them, but I wasn't going anywhere with Brad's arms wrapped around me.

"What the fuck, man?!" Vinny yelled. "Leave them alone!"

"Ask them what they said about your fucking girlfriend!" I yelled back.

He paused. And then he turned to look at them. He was *very* unhappy to hear that they had something to say. Unfortunately for me, Charles ran over to see what the big deal was. This ended any chance of me and Vinny kicking the shit out of these little shits together.

"What the fuck is going on?" Charles asked.

"Them," I said, much more calmly now that he was here. "They were talking shit about Victoria and I was about to knock their fucking lights out—"

"Alright, enough," Charles said, more annoyed than anything. "It's over."

I looked at him like he was insane. "No, it's not! Those motherfuckers are dead!"

Charles glared at me and grumbled, "Shut the fuck up before you get expelled. Come with me." Charles took me by the shoulder and dragged me away. I didn't even get to see Vinny swing at one of the guys, but the sound of the crowd screaming with delight at someone fighting was all I needed to know that justice was being served.

While the faculty ran over to break up the fight and dozens of people were screaming and running because they wanted to cause some chaos, Charles dragged me into a classroom and gave me the sternest talking-to of my life. "I know it's really fucked up that people are saying those things about Victoria," he said, "but you can't just go picking fights with people! Do you want to get kicked off the team or get suspended or expelled? Ruin your life before you're even graduated?"

"I can't just do nothing!"

"Yes, you can! Don't make a dumb decision now that ruins your life because you wanna be the nice guy!"

I thought he was kidding. I seriously thought he was kidding. How could I not say something? "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He sighed and forced himself to calm down a bit. "Look, dude, you're a really nice guy and I get you want to help her out. I want to help her, too. But there's some things that we can't fix. This is a job for the police. Not us. I don't want you to get hurt trying to solve something you can't fix. Just be her friend and be supportive. That's really all we can do right now, man."

I've always had a personal stake in issues that women have. Abortion rights, contraceptives, stuff like that. What really pisses me right the fuck off is the dirty stuff like sexism and rape jokes and guys talking about the fucking a girl without her being cool with it first. Those creeps online who treat women like an inferior species that exist to make babies and suck our dicks deserve the noose. But I'm not some male feminist, either. I learned from the Internet that lots of those guys are just scumbags who are just trying to get laid so whenever I see a dude call himself one, I'm always hesitant to think he's got good intentions.

I have a sister. I'm terrified of how the world is going to chew her up and spit her out when I'm not around to protect her. I'll get exactly one year of school with her to help her along the way and then I'm off to college. The thought of some guy treating her terribly and scarring her for life in a way I can't help scares the everloving shit out of me.

The honest truth is I saw Charles as an older brother ever since I'd first met him. This was the first time I'd ever actually been angry at him. Not like "you were rough with me at practice, but we'll make up afterward and everything will be fine" mad. Like serious anger. He was always telling me that the key to keeping the peace around here was helping people who were in trouble that really needed help. Victoria was the laughingstock of the school. There was nobody else I'd ever met who was in such bad pain as her.

And Charles didn't want to do anything except be nice to her?

He didn't have anything else to say and we left to go back to class. Ashley was waiting close by and ran over to check on me. "Hey, are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," I lied. "Just angry."

"I heard what those guys were saying," she said. "It's so bullshit."

"I wanted to beat the shit out of them," I said, my anger boiling over again.

"I can't blame you. Fucking assholes."

"And now Charles doesn't want to do anything?! I mean, what the fuck is that?!"

"What?" She glanced around to see who was listening and lowered her voice. "Tell you the truth, Kara told me the same thing. I was *so mad*." She smiled a little. "I mean, I guess it would kinda be overkill now. After you left, Vinny started kicking their asses." She smiled a little. "One of them started crying."

That made me smile a little, too. "God, I wish I could've seen that."

"You're really brave for sticking up for them," she said. "I don't know if I could have done something like that."

This was the first time I'd ever really *noticed* Ashley. I mean, besides all the times I'd look at her when she was wearing cutoffs or a really tight shirt. We'd been friends for a while, but I never thought of

her as anything more than that. She's really, *really* hot, but knowing that she actually cared about Victoria made me think.

I laughed a little, trying not to blush. "It was nothing."

She smiled again and said she had to go to class and I should hurry if I didn't want to be late, too. I ended up being late for class anyway. Sitting in English class was when I decided that I wanted to try and go out with her.

## Vinny

Spencer and I have an... interesting relationship, to say the least. We're both leaders on our respective teams and would become Team Captains next season, but the on-going feud over the Rocky Turkiewicz stuff made it so we could never be friends. I didn't even dislike the guy or anything. He's kinda full of himself, sure, but I've met a lot worse guys than him. But because we had a genuinely stupid feud between our teams, I couldn't go to him for help with the Victoria thing. And Charles was the Captain and he couldn't be seen associating with me, especially with Homecoming getting closer every day. God knows we couldn't put our problems aside for one day to look out for an amazing girl who didn't deserve what happened to her.

Without being able to rely on them for help, I had to turn to someone else.

Brad Kendrick had to have been hitting the roids over the summer because he came back to school in August and he looked like a truck. He went from this scrawny little guy to being one of the biggest dudes in the entire school. Everyone knew he was kind of a dick, but nobody had the balls to say it to his face. I had absolutely nothing left to lose so I went to him for help.

"You want me to do *what*?" he asked as he gave me a look that made me feel like the biggest moron alive. I can't even pretend to blame him for it. What I was asking was insane.

"Just go to his house or find him when he goes out to eat or whatever and rough him up a bit," I said.

"Are you fucking with me or something? Is this supposed to be you guys' little prank? Get me arrested for fighting a guy?"

I had absolutely nothing to offer him except money. "Look, I'm *begging* you to help me here. This guy is a fucking scumbag and he deserves to pay."

He studied me and relaxed a little. Not enough to just step up and do my dirty work for me, though. "So why don't you do something about it?"

"Because he'd kick the shit out of me! I'll do whatever I can to help, but I can't take him on my own."

"And I can?"

I realized I needed to change tactics. Brad was kind of a dick, but it's not like he didn't know how to get a girl to like him. "How would you feel if it was your girlfriend? Wouldn't you want to take the guy's head off for hurting her?"

Brad rolled his eyes. "Yeah, fine, I would. But this isn't gonna be cheap."

I ended up paying every penny I had to my name. Four hundred dollars. Plus he wanted my PS3. I was planning on getting a PS4 soon anyway so I used it as partial payment when I said I didn't have enough cash to pay him *and* afford it. We made the sale the next day out by his truck. It sucked, but it was worth it.

"Victoria can *never* know about this," I said. "If anyone ever asks, I never paid you and this was all your idea."

"Fine with me, man," he said while I loaded the cardboard box containing the console into his back seat. "There's a controller in there, right?"

## Ashley

My relationship with my parents has always been hard to explain. I love them, but they were making it extremely hard to care about them during Sophomore year. All they did was fight and fight and fight and when I got home from school, they pretended everything was fine before going to separate sides of the house. How am I supposed to love you when all you do is argue? I hated being stuck in the middle of this shit.

There were good days where it felt like we're a family, sure, but they started to feel rare. Mom started working more and more and Dad was trying to do whatever he could to get out of the house. I ended up on my own more often than not. They made sure I had money for food and Mom would get groceries every so often, but I might as well be an emancipated minor or something.

Looking back, this was probably a blessing in disguise. It was prepping me for what was to come. I was just in denial that the divorce was coming.

They called me into the living room early on a Saturday morning. I'll never forget what day it was because it was only two weeks away from Homecoming and I was planning on going last-minute dress shopping with Kara and her friends later that day. I already had mine, but it gave me a chance to schmooze with the Upperclassmen who I'd be bossing around next year so it was more or less a required outing. They may be massive assholes, but they were my assholes and I really wanted them to like me.

I walked into the living room and they looked really upset. Obviously I knew something was wrong, but I thought somebody had died. My selfish ass instantly began thinking up excuses for why I didn't have to go to the funeral. I absolutely loathe funerals. I already told them that if I die, I don't want anything. No wake, no burial, and definitely no mass. Just burn me and scatter my ashes across the flower garden or toss my urn over a bridge or something.

Except it wasn't a funeral.

My Dad motioned for me to sit down between them. The first clue should have been that they were on opposite sides of the room. "Your Mother and I... we have a lot to talk about..."

"We know that... things have been pretty tense around here lately," Mom continued. She always knew how to finish his sentences for him. "And we've been doing a lot of talking..."

"Your Mother and I are going to be separating." And Dad was great at just ripping off the bandaid without even considering beating around the bush. "I'm going to be moving out for a little while and you'll be staying here. I'll be around to visit, but for now it's just going to be the two of you. Just know that you can call me whenever and I'll make time for... you..."

I forget the rest of the conversation. It doesn't matter. He never actually came back. He went up north for a job with my uncle who never actually came around here either and that was that. My guess is part of the terms of the upcoming divorce were no contact until I turned eighteen. I'm not shocked thinking about it now. He once drunkenly told me that he was never meant to be a father. She once told me that her marriage was a mistake while she was crying her eyes out one night.

And that was that. I didn't cry. I wouldn't give them the satisfaction of seeing me hurt.

Dress shopping dragged on like a quadriplegic running a marathon. I couldn't have given a shit about Kylie and her boy troubles or Elena possibly losing her virginity or Brooke and her petty bullshit if somebody paid me. Kara was sneaking whiskey from a flask she kept in her purse and offered me some.

*Fuck it*, I thought. I nearly downed the whole thing. She had to rip it from my grasp or else I would have finished it all and asked for more.

"Somebody's thirsty," Brooke said with her snarky little laugh.



“If you want more,” Kylie said, “come to my party tonight. We’re gonna go pretty hard, though, and I know you don’t drink much so it’s cool if you sit wanna this one out.”

“I’m in.”

No hesitation. That was what they wanted. Kylie and Stacey and Elena and Brooke. These were the girls I had to impress if I wanted to become Head Cheerleader next year. Kylie was going to graduate in a few months with Kara so I didn’t need to worry about her, but one bad word from her— Kara’s best friend on Earth— and I was doomed. These four girls were going to become my sisters until May. Come hell or high water, I had to do whatever it took to impress them. I wasn’t going to be partying *for* them, though. They could go fuck themselves. I needed to forget about everything for a little bit. Kara seemed to approve, though, so that was enough for me.

While I drank myself into a stupor, the girls had their fun.

Seeing Elena sprawled out on the couch with her shirt off as her boyfriend, Kenny, Frenched her so aggressively that I thought she was going to rip his clothes off and fuck him right there was a stark contrast to the sweet and innocent little girl she acted like outside of school. A hundred people stood around the couch, cheering and hooting and hollering with every exchange of spit. It was repulsing. How these two hadn’t fucked yet could be the topic of the psychology major’s thesis paper. Elena was one of those wannabe Catholic school girls that wouldn’t let her boyfriend so much as put his hand below her waist when they were sober, but put one drink in her and she whores it up with the best of them.

The other girls weren’t fairing much better. Kylie and Stacey were in a heated battle with each other regarding who could get laid first before the other girl passed out. Brooke and her one friend were engaged in a brutal game of beer pong with two of the Senior football players that really was just an excuse to miss on purpose and drink more.

Even though I was drunk and loving it, I really wished I was hanging out with the girls at my place. Not these people. My *friends*. Casey and Heather and Michelle and Lauren. It’d been a few days since we’d gone out. I felt like a shitty friend and a worse almost-girlfriend. I was falling so hard for her, but I was neglecting her. She said she understood why we needed to take things slow and why I needed to have my own life, but I felt horrible. And I knew partying is what we do, but this just felt like overkill. When I was in charge, I swore I’d never let a party get like this.

But instead of being with the people I loved, I was downing Jello shots by the gallon to try and forget my shitty, pathetic life. I wouldn’t try coke until the next party when the girls called me to the bathroom. When I did, I was absolutely in love.

## Beth

It was a horrible idea. The thought of even doing it filled me with dread. And now here we were, Grace marching through the hallway while I struggled to keep up. I begged for her not to actually go through with this, but she wouldn't listen. She'd been dreaming of this moment since I told her about what happened in the bathroom. Now it was Monday morning and she wanted blood.

The ACH cheerleading royalty were congregated together, as usual. Kara, Kylie, Stacey, Brooke, and, of course, Ashley, were standing together, laughing, when Grace stepped up to them like a boxer ready to take their heads off. I'll never forget how they looked at her. Like a rat approaching a table of rich women enjoying their Sunday brunch. Pure disgust that they had to now deal with this.

"We have to talk," Grace demanded. I wanted to beg her to leave, but she wouldn't listen if I tried. "*Now.*"

"What do *you* want?" Stacey demanded.

I looked over at Ashley and she looked as white as a sheet. She knew exactly what this was about and even though she was in the wrong, her look that she gave to me was crying for help. She would do anything to not have to face Kara's wrath.

"*We need to talk,*" Grace repeated. "Alone." She pointed at Ashley, venom in eyes. "Except for her. She stays."

Brooke wanted to protest, but Kara waved her off. The girls shot me a look before they did as they were bid and walked away. Ashley slowly approached her new best friend. Like a dog that knew it did something bad and was hoping a sad face would make it all okay. Unfortunately for her, there was no saving her skin when Grace was this angry.

"What's the matter?" Kara asked. She didn't seem angry that Grace was speaking to her like this. It was weird. I thought she'd be pissed that we were ruining her morning.

"Your friend here owes my friend twenty bucks," Grace yelled, never taking her eyes off of Ashley. "She stole it from Beth yesterday in the bathroom."

"No I didn't!" Ashley protested.

"She was treating Beth like shit and then she stole her money when she left her purse in the bathroom," Grace said. "She owes her twenty bucks and I'm not leaving until she pays her the fucking money back!"

Ashley looked at Kara, hoping she would take her side. Her lies began to spill like water from a broken bottle. "Kara, come on, I didn't steal shit! I don't even have twenty bucks on me! Check my purse, I didn't steal shit! She's lying!"

Kara had finally had enough. "Ashley, take out your wallet." When Ashley stared at her incredulously, Kara glared at her. "*Now.*" Ashley did as she was bid and guiltily removed her wallet from inside of her purse. "Huh. I guess you were right. You don't have twenty bucks. It's fine. You owe her thirty for stealing from her."

"Kara!"

"I'm sorry, do you want to make it forty?" Kara asked. "I've been to your house, you can afford to give her fifty."

"No, wait, thirty is fine," I stammered out, not wanting to make this any worse for myself than it already was. I knew Ashley would retaliate at some point. I didn't want to seem greedy by asking for more. "It's okay. Please."

Kara began studying me. "It's nice to see you don't hold grudges. I'd have her cleaning my car with a toothbrush if she stole from me." She looked back at Ashley. "You heard her, she wants thirty bucks! Come on, class starts in two minutes!" Ashley handed me all the money in her wallet and said she'd get me the rest tomorrow. I swore it was okay, but Ash said she'd handle it. I hoped things would end now that I got my money back, but it wasn't over. "Now apologize to her."

Ashley went from being shocked to being angry. "No! Absolutely not!"

Kara gave her the angriest look I'd ever seen from someone before in my life. "What did you say?" When Ashley saw her expression, she immediately backed down. "Apologize. *Now.*"

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"Louder," Grace demanded. If Kara was allowed to pile on Ashley, Grace wanted in on it, too. Kara looked irritated that Grace spoke up, but she nodded to her and waited for Ashley to give her modified apology.

Ashley glared at her before giving the most convincing, "I'm really sorry, Beth. I'll never do it again. I promise." She looked at Kara to see if everything was okay and Kara nodded.

Kara turned away from her little rebellious protege and said, "If she ever does something like this again, come straight to me. I'll deal with it. I promise this will never happen again."

"I... um... thank you..." I mumbled.

Kara looked to Grace. "Is there anything else?"

Grace shook her head and turned to leave. I basically had to run to keep up with her. It was so sweet of her to stand up for me, but I knew this would only make things worse. You don't stand up to bullies without them trying to get one up on you. Ashley was already pissed that Kara sided against her. Now Grace was going to have to face the consequences of standing up for me.

Why didn't I just keep my mouth shut and go hungry for a week?

## Ashley

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Kara was talking to me like I was some kind of idiot little kid. She told me a thousand times over how much she hated Grace. Why would she side with her against me on this? It's not like she hasn't done this kinda thing to people before.

After our little sit down, I took Kara into the gym and unloaded on her. "What the fuck was that?! Why did you make me give her my money?! Beth is a massive loser and you're siding with *her* and *GRACE* over me?! I thought we were friends! What the fuck is this?!"

Kara watched me in silence as I got everything off my chest. When I was finally done, she spoke. "Are you done?" I was glaring at her, but I nodded. I said my piece. "Good. First off, never speak to me like that again. I was looking out for you."

"How? By making me give up my lunch money for the entire week? Really doing a great job of helping me here!"

"Michelle came to me and told me about how you stole the cash in front of all of your friends," Kara said. "What kind of a moron steals money right out of someone's purse in front of a bunch of people?" She stepped in closer and narrowed her eyes. "*We* do not steal from people. We're supposed to run this school. If we want something, we let people know and they give it to us. We don't resort to taking money from people, no matter how much we dislike them."

"What about the shit with that Damien kid?" I asked, grasping at straws to defend myself. "Huh? He gives us a bunch of money so we don't rat him out. Isn't that stealing?"

"We both know that if we tried to rat him out, he'd bury us," Kara said very calmly. "He has dirt on everybody. Not even I could stop him if he decided to go after us. So instead of fighting, we let him do his thing uninterrupted and he pays us for the trouble. And besides, there's a major difference between being *given* money and taking it right out of someone's fucking wallet, you stupid fuck."

"It's still bullshit!" I said, my anger bubbling back up.

"Grace could have made this a lot more difficult if she wanted to," Kara said as she grew even more frustrated. "If she had gone to O'Reilly or Patrick, you'd get suspended. I had to make sure she kept her mouth shut and thought I was on her side for a change."

"But you *hate her*!" I sounded like a whining child. "Why would you decide that now was when you would be nice to her?"

"You're right," Kara said. "I do hate her. And if you've been paying attention over the past few weeks, you'd know that the first rule of being in charge of this dump is looking after your people. You're a cheerleader, I'm Head Cheerleader. I'm supposed to help you out. I kept you from being suspended." She motioned for me to sit down on the bleachers. I did and she sat beside me. "Grace Carlisle isn't a cheerleader. She's some uptight bitch with stupid purple hair that made it her mission to make my life miserable and waste my time. I'm not going to let *her* push us around. So what do I do when she steps out of line and tries to fuck with us? I play nice and give her the money you owed her friend. You stole from her and you got caught. Make nice and move on. And now she thinks this is over and we're okay. Bull. Fucking. Shit. I don't let someone like her go after someone like you. She stepped out of line and now she needs to pay." She smiled at me. It was dripping with anger. A thirst for vengeance. It was empowering. "So are you in or not?"

"Yeah." My smile then grew to match her devilish grin.

## Lauren

Something weird was going on with Ashley. Ever since she went to that party with Kara and the others on Saturday night, she's been acting distant. Like all she talks about when we hang out to do homework or watch movies is what they've been doing.

"Kara told me I could have some of her old clothes. If you want, you can come with us and we can find you something. She has such great taste."

"Elena was an absolute mess at that party. Like, you know how she acts like a goodie-two shoes around here? I thought she was going to start blowing him right there in the living room! Like seriously, she looked like such a whore."

"I'm gonna go out with Kara this Friday night after the game. You wanna come with?"

After days of nothing but hearing about them, I was ready to just give up. But I liked her too much to ghost her. She was the first girl to reciprocate feelings *and* she was the first girl I crushed on that I came out to. I don't know, after a while it seemed like I was the third wheel. Everything had to revolve around cheerleading and being popular anymore. It was getting kinda suffocating. She seemed to get that something was up when I didn't have anything to say to her after she spoke about her and Kara going to get their nails and hair done before Homecoming for an hour straight and asked me about my day.

"It was fine." I went home a little after that.

What I did know was there was no chance in hell of me doing cheerleading again Junior year. It was tough enough splitting that and volleyball on top of all the schoolwork we're expected to do just to be able to play. Sure, it'd be nice to possibly hang out with my kinda-sorta-not-really girlfriend a lot more next year, but I couldn't deal with more of whatever... *this* is. And as selfish as it is, there was no way I'd become Head Cheerleader with Ashley around... but having "Captain of a 6A Volleyball Team" on my college application would look really good if I was going all in on a USC scholarship. College admissions are cutthroat and I'd need every advantage I could get if I wanted to make that team.

It sucked that I would be leaving her for sports, but I had to look out for myself. To be completely honest, I was falling hard for Ash. So hard, it scared me. Even if we were going through some weird speed bump, I knew we could overcome it if she would just listen to me. But this thing with Kara was changing her. I didn't understand.

No matter what happened, at least I knew she was going to be my date to Homecoming in a little over a week.

## Vinny

Brad asked me to meet him at his place at midnight on Sunday. I was hoping it was good news, but I brought a small pocket knife in case he decided to fuck me over and have the guys on the team try to kick my ass or something. It was probably stupid to assume I was going to get jumped, but I'd been so exhausted since the pictures got leaked that I didn't know what else to think. The stress was literally killing me.

When I got to his place, I found him sitting in his truck in the driveway. I hopped in and he stared at me without any emotion at all. "It's over."

"Did you get him?"

He nodded. "I smashed his phone and laptop, too. That won't help with the pictures he's already sent, but at least he won't be able to do it again for a really long time." He handed me a pair of Jordans. "I found these in his closet. He doesn't need them anymore."

My eyes practically bulged out of my head. "Did you break his leg?!"

"What? No. Just his arm. His smile is kinda fucked up, too, but hey, teeth can be replaced." He could tell that the news was less than encouraging so he gave his most earnest attempt at calming me down. "Hey, don't worry about it. I reminded him that he's the one who sent revenge porn to a bunch of people he doesn't even know and that if he tries to come after me, he's gonna go to prison. We're gonna be fine! Just trust me."

When he puts it that way, how can anyone not be reassured?

Brad sent me and my newish pair of shoes on my way, giving me a lot of time to think as I walked back to school. I tried everything I could to justify what I asked Brad to do in my head. He sent nude pictures of his ex to half the school and ruined her life. He deserved to face some kind of punishment for it. I actually helped the school because now Davy Crockett lost their best wide receiver before the Homecoming Game this Friday. After what he did to Victoria, he had this coming and it was up to me, her boyfriend, to see it done.

But looking back on it, the thing that really worried me wasn't that Brad actually went through with it. It's that it seemed like he enjoyed doing it.

## Ashley

To say Kara Alderman is an evil genius is an understatement. She's been dealing with assholes like Grace Carlisle for years now. Beating them is easy. I learned everything I know about revenge from Kara and I owe her so much for that.

We weren't going to physically harm her or anything. That'd be too easy. We needed to make sure both she and the entire school knew who was in charge. This wouldn't be a one-off prank, though. Very much the opposite. Kara and I stayed up all night on Saturday planning how this would work out. I brought the energy drinks and she brought the whiskey and a couple lines of coke and we partied like absolute fucking rock stars while coming up with every small detail that could ruin that little whore's life.

It all began at Homecoming. That was our D-Day.

On Monday during lunch, she would be approached by Bruce White. Bruce was one of the star players on the football team, behind only Charles and Spencer. Bruce had been trying to fuck Grace for years now, but she'd always given him the cold shoulder. For the tenth time in four years, Bruce approached her. This time, however, he had flowers in his hand.

"Hey, Gracie!" he said loud and proud so everyone could hear. "I got a joke for you. A guy buys his wife a dozen roses. She glares at him and says, 'So I guess you expect me to open my legs for you?' and the guy says, 'Don't you have a vase?'" It was a stupid, awful, sexist, and just flat out lazy joke, but everyone around them was laughing. Save Grace. "So I thought if I give you these flowers now, will you let me borrow your vase after Homecoming this Saturday?"

Grace looked disgusted. Her face became a bright shade of red when she realized everyone was staring. "Fuck off, you disgusting creep!" She took the flowers and smashed them on the ground before storming off. Everyone, and I mean *everyone* was pointing and laughing, more so at Bruce for being made a fool of, but the seeds were planted.

Bruce was known for being a bit of a class clown around here. Except instead of witty banter, he went for the darkest, most crude jokes he could think up. His shock humor made even the most prudish of Freshmen cackle like madmen. Him embarrassing himself with a sexist joke was just another day in his life. He'd probably get detention for this stunt, but Kara said he was more than happy to do it.

*Making me apologize for stealing that little bitch's money. Fuck you, Grace.*

Lauren met me at my place a few hours before the big Homecoming Game. The cheerleaders didn't need to show up until about an hour and a half before game time so I had a couple of hours to relax with my girl. I gave her a golden necklace I'd been saving for when we officially started going out. It had a ruby in the middle. It was kinda fashioned like a choker. It wasn't cheap, but having parents not on the verge of bankruptcy quite yet that wanted to make me feel better after announcing their separation meant I was getting a lot more money for "chores" than before. I'd spent most of it on blow, but I made sure to save up for Lauren. I was in love.

"I know I've been really distant lately," I quietly said as we sat on my bed, the sunlight gleaming off the finely cut red stone. The ruby really matched her golden hair. It was almost as beautiful as the girl wearing it. "And I gotta be honest with you for a second..." I took a deep breath. "My parents are getting a divorce." She looked at me with these sad, understanding eyes and I knew it was safe to continue. "I'm really falling for you, Lauren. But seeing my parents break up... I don't know. It scared me. I don't wanna lose you and end up like *them*."

"Aww, Ash," she said as she hugged me tight. "I'm not going anywhere. And I get it. My parents haven't been together for years." She pulled away from me. "I just wish you would have told me. I want

help. And I hope you know I'll always be there for you, no matter how bad things get around here. Just *talk to me*. Okay?"

I kissed her. It was as perfect as the first time. I told myself that I would wait until I asked her to be my girlfriend, but I couldn't stop myself. I had to do it. It was all going to be so amazing. I was gonna have the greatest girlfriend imaginable and we would go to Homecoming together and I'd ask her to be my girlfriend the next day and we'd be together forever. I was gonna have the greatest weekend of my entire life.

And to top it all off, now it was time to ruin Grace Carlisle's stupid, pathetic life.



## Beth

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Why do you *have* to go?”

I’d never seen Grace so angry before. When she got called out of our math class to meet with O’Reilly, who was in charge of organizing Homecoming alongside Student Council this year, she looked absolutely furious when they returned. On the ride home, she kept ranting and raving about how this was bullshit and she wasn’t going to do it.

“Because anyone who gets voted into Homecoming Court *has* to attend the game and the dance,” she yelled. I knew she wasn’t mad at me, but it still hurt hearing her yell at me. “And when I told O’Reilly I wasn’t doing it, he threatened to give me detention! What that fuck is that?! Detention because I won’t go to a stupid dance?! I didn’t even run for this stupid fucking thing! It’s supposed to be the popular people and whoever’s on student council! Why am *I* on Homecoming Court?!” She punched the steering wheel. It made me jump. “I hate these dances more than anything. I’m not fucking going. Uh-uh, no fucking way. Especially after all of that *bullshit* with Bruce in the cafeteria. Can you believe that piece of shit didn’t even get brought in to talk to Patrick?! Fucking ASSHOLES! That was humiliating! I’ve never felt so... violated!.. FUCK!”

I wanted to hug her, but I knew she just needed to blow off some steam. I felt so helpless. She didn’t deserve this. I wanted to fucking murder that Bruce guy. With no other options, I decided to try and play the supportive girlfriend as best as I could.

“If it helps, we could... go together...”

I’d never asked someone to a dance before. Actually doing it was, for lack of a better term, mortifying. Sure, we were *dating* at this point, but we’d never done anything so public. Neither of us were going to be “out” at this, but it would still be nice to be around people. Even pretending is better than nothing. At least I told myself that when I tried to justify it in my head.

She faced me and the pain inside of her seemed to evaporate away. “Aww, Beth...”

“I mean you don’t *have* to go with me,” I said as fast as I could manage, scrambling to salvage the moment. “But, like, you’re being forced to so it might as well be with me and I know I’m talking too much so I might as well shut up now, huh?”

Grace leaned over and kissed me. I was almost mad when she pulled away, but the sparkle in her eyes just kinda made me know that everything was going to be okay. “Look, I’m going to hate myself for doing this and I know this is probably just some big joke... but if you really want to go with me then... I guess I could make an exception.” She shook her head. “Fuck, I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“We could go in what we’re wearing now,” I offered. “Jeans are really dance-chique this year.”

She laughed. “Maybe a low-cut shirt. Or maybe sweatpants?”

“Sweatpants sound good.”

We kissed again. “You’re coming to this game then, right? I’m not going up in front of the entire school with those losers if you’re not there to watch.”

“I’ll be there,” I said. “And who knows... maybe they’ll make you Queen.”

She scoffed. “Absolutely fucking not. Kara would kill me if that happened.”

## Ashley

As expected, the guys were killing it. The score was 27-6 by the end of the first half. Spencer had three touchdowns, Charles had a receiving *and* rushing touchdown, Bruce White had two sacks, Brad broke a kid's back tackling him, Frank was spinning people out like a human dreidel, and Jamar Watford, the kicker and backup quarterback, scored a passing touchdown on a fake field goal and then missed the extra point. He got laughed at on the sidelines, but it was all in good fun.

But as anyone who knows how high school Homecoming Games work, that wasn't what the Homecoming Game itself was all about. It's about community, friendship, getting hammered in the parking lot on cheap beer stolen from your dad's garage, and somehow surviving until the afterparty without puking or passing out in the blistering Texas sun. It's nice to have a winning team, but winning isn't everything.

And for me and Kara, the real highlight was yet to come.

At the start of the week, each grade got to nominate four people to represent their grade during the festivities on Friday night; two boys and two girls. These sixteen would make up the Homecoming Court proper. Of the four people per grade that were elected to be in Homecoming Court, two would be voted as their grade's "Prince and Princess." Over the course of the game, there would be a vote. At halftime when the votes were tallied for these select eight people, two people were chosen to be elevated from a simple Prince and Princess and become Homecoming King and Queen, the second most prestigious accomplishment in high school. Only by being named Prom King and Queen ranks higher, something I had my greedy little eyes on for my Junior year. The lucky winners would be revealed at the dance the next day.

Sounds complicated? It really isn't. Not when you rig the ballots.

See, the method for voting was pretty easy. A big whiteboard was hung up near the Snack Shack closest to the bleachers we, the students, sat in. It's the most convenient place for it as most of the student body would be near there anyway *and* it was an incentive to get people to show up to support their friends. This whiteboard showed the sweet sixteen that made it through the first round of voting. From these sixteen, each grade could cast their votes in four special little voting booths set up in a merchandise stand that was co-opted each year for this ceremony.

Kara and I paid Tracy Summers a little visit after practice on Wednesday to make sure she understood what we expected of her. She got bumped up to become the Secretary when we realized Spencer wasn't interested in doing anything. Tracy was the only person who got elected that actually cared about school so Charles did the noble thing and chose her to bail his buddy out from actually needing to do any work. The truth is she did take very detailed records and kept our notes in order, a much better job than Spencer could ever do. She even tutored some of the... ahem... "academically impaired" athletes who weren't going to Division 1 schools for their GPAs. We treated her like shit behind her back for seeming so desperate and she still stuck around. I think she was lonely.

Even though she was an asset in many ways, it was time for her to return the favor for being allowed to hang out with us a couple times a week.

I bring this up to answer a simple question: Who tallies the votes for Homecoming Court, Prince and Princess, and Homecoming King and Queen? The Secretary of the Student Council.

## Tracy

I didn't even know Kara and Ashley had my address until they showed up at my house after school was over. Seeing someone from my school standing outside my place scared the hell out of me. My house isn't exactly the cleanest and my brother was passed out from another date with the painkillers he took "for his back." I had to make sure I kept them outside and they seemed to understand when I asked them to talk out front. I said my brother worked night shifts and couldn't be woken up.

"Look, Trace," Kara began in the most diplomatic voice she could muster, "we need a favor. It's a *big* one and we wouldn't be asking you if this wasn't something that was very important to us. Do you get what I'm trying to say?"

"I... I think so?" It was still so weird to be talking to people like Charles Bruxton and Kara Alderman. Even after being on Student Council for weeks now, I still felt wrong. It was like a grade schooler squaring up with Muhammed Ali. What did I do to deserve to talk to these people? That being said, I had absolutely no idea what she was trying to say to me.

"We have a... hmm..." Ashley said, flip-flopping the words around in her head until she found something she liked. "A proposition."

"That's a good word," Kara said. I could tell she was just bullshitting now and this was all a big joke. "A proposition."

"You're the Secretary. And one of your jobs is to count the votes for Homecoming Court, right?" Ashley asked.

It was a stupid question. Everyone knew that. O'Reilly even briefed us on this during a meeting about how the Homecoming Game procedure worked. "Yeah?"

"We had something... special in mind for this year's election," Kara said, trying and failing to hide a little grin. I could see the outline of her dimples beginning to crease her cheeks as her smile fought a winning battle to reveal just how excited for this she was.

"Please don't ask me to rig it for you, Kara," I begged. "I really like you guys, but that doesn't seem right, you know? I mean, you're *you*! Everyone loves you! You don't *need* to be Homecoming Queen!"

Kara seemed genuinely flattered by my compliment, rushed and panicked as they may be. "Aww. Tracy. That's... actually super sweet of you. But believe it or not, it's not for me."

"Is it for...?" Ashley shook her head. I was at a complete loss. "Then who do you want me to rig it for? I mean, I'm still really uncomfortable with the idea and I'm sure it's for a good reason, but—" Ashley handed me a stack of ballot sheets she had photocopied and filled in herself. I read the top one and my eyes widened for a moment before I composed myself. Just to be sure, I read the next few. I thought she gave me the wrong ballots for a second. "Grace? Grace *Carlisle*?" They both nodded solemnly and then exchanged a smile between them, the punchline of the joke being completely unknown to me. "But... why?"

"I want to do her a favor," Kara said. "Make up for all the times I treated her like shit. I do feel bad about it. I was such a bitch to her over the years. We've known each other since grade school and I've always been cruel to her. But now I want to make things right. With college a few months away, I don't want to go away knowing I didn't try to do anything I could to settle things between us forever. And to do that, we *need* to get her on Homecoming Court."

"And that's where you come in," Ashley finished. "Can we count on you?"

## Vinny

While the rest of the team was preparing their big prank to screw with the football team, I stayed home. When the guys wanted to get food before the game, I said I was busy. The day of Homecoming came, but I didn't go. It wouldn't be right for me to have fun with my friends while Victoria was suffering alone.

So instead, I went over to her place with Jasmine and we checked in on her.

We found her in the middle of getting high on more oxy. I guess she must have hid these ones because I flushed the others. She'd already downed three pills and was looking forward to another two. I'm shocked this wasn't enough to kill her. She'd told us she was doing really bad when we tried to reach out to her before, but I didn't think she would ever get this bad.

She was *not* happy to see that we invited ourselves into her house and saw her in the state she was in. "Guys, please... just go..." she begged, her speech already slurred. "Pleaaaaase..."

Jasmine is her closest friend in the world. She'd never leave Victoria's side if she could help it, especially when she's hurting. She was crying just looking at the state of her friend. "Tori... don't do this to yourself..."

I don't know what possessed me to glance over at her dresser, but I did and I saw something weird sticking out of her underwear drawer. I walked over and realized it was a big plastic ziplock bag. When Victoria saw me, she panicked. "No, Vinny, please don't—"

It was too late. I opened it up and saw my biggest fear come to life. Inside were dozens of pill bottles. I couldn't even pronounce half of these drugs, let alone imagine what they do. But the first thing that I did recognize was the Xanax. Then the Adderall. There had to have been hundreds of pills inside of that bag.

Then I felt Victoria hitting me in the back with her forearms, her strikes weak and lumbering. She was yelling and screaming at me to leave her alone and put those away. Jasmine started crying, pleading for her to stop. It didn't even hurt. Hell, it looked like it hurt her more to actually hit me. I let her smack me in the chest a few times when I turned around to get her energy out. When she hit me in the face, my hands snapped forward and grabbed her wrists. I'd never do this to a woman unless she was attacking me and somebody needed to calm her down. I would never hurt her. I loved her too much to ever even consider doing that in anger, but somebody needed to stop her before she hurt herself.

"Please," she repeated, her resistance crumbling as she grew more and more tired. "Please, just let me go... Just leave..." She passed out shortly after, collapsing in my arms.

We made sure she was resting on her side and stayed with her until her parents got home. We explained everything, the nude pictures included. They thanked us profusely and asked if we wanted to go, but we said we were staying until she woke up. She wouldn't come to until almost noon the next day. While she was in the shower, her parents called and asked us to come over. I could never say no to them. After her shower, she left her room and came down to get some water. When she did, we were all sitting in the living room with the bag on the coffee table and information for a rehab facility.

There was a lot of crying and swearing and arguing. She resented us for telling them about the pictures. She said she hated us and she never wanted to see us again. She said some awful things to her parents. It was really painful to hear her snap at us like that. But then she said she knew she needed help. She begged us to forgive her. Jasmine swore she'd never abandon her. I told her I was in love with her and would never leave her. Her parents cried and cried and eventually convinced her to get into the car. I held Jasmine tight as they drove off to check her in.

We wouldn't see her again for over a month.

## Beth

Grace and I showed up to the game ready to laugh at how stupid everything was. Neither of us cared for football so who won was inconsequential to us. So many people were already drunk, I thought they'd need to be taken away by the paramedics because the heat was going to be brutal. Sixteen lucky losers were dressed in suits and ties and dresses as they awaited their fates as chosen by a jury of their peers, pleading their cases as to why they deserved to be named Homecoming King and Queen to whoever would listen.

And then there was Grace, sporting this absolutely gorgeous black and purple gown that had no business being at a football game. She tugged at the sleeves to try and stretch them out. Every step she took was awkward. She never wore heels before and here she was now standing a full head taller than me in a pair of them. "God, I look like the Royal Family's prostitute."

"I think you look really hot," I whispered. She smiled a little.

We both agreed that she would do no campaigning for this and would instead just endure standing around for a few hours in the sun while trying to avoid ruining the dress. We spent a grueling twenty minutes looking for something she'd remotely enjoy wearing and I'll be damned if she let it get dirty the day before the dance. Why they made the Homecoming Court people actually wear their dresses and suits the day before the dance makes no sense to me. People our age are filthy. How do they expect them to make it through an entire football game without getting them dirty?

As we turned to make our way to the bleachers, we were stopped by our dear Principal Patrick and the head chaperone of Homecoming this year, Mr. O'Reilly. "Woah there, little lady," Patrick mocked, his neck flab giggling as he spoke. "Anybody in Homecoming Court sits up in the Executive Suite." He looked extremely confused as to why Grace Carlisle of all people was in Homecoming Court.

Grace looked at me and shrugged. "Beats sitting in the sun all day."

As we made for the elevator to take us to the Suite Level, they stopped us. "Umm... I'm sorry," O'Reilly said, half-smiling. "Are you on Homecoming Court, too?" I shook my head. "Yeah, see this is kinda reserved for them and their dates only. Perks of winning and all."

"Oh, don't worry," Grace said. "She is my date."

Even though these were two old guys who undoubtedly thought she was kidding or something extremely homophobic for even suggesting we were a thing, my heart kinda sang a little when she admitted that we were together. Just the thought of being myself around this school... fuck, it felt good. Too bad that feeling was over as soon as Patrick and O'Reilly laughed in her face as if she was the funniest human being alive.

"Very funny," Patrick said. "Come on, it's only for a couple hours."

"But I wanna sit with Beth," Grace protested. "That's the only reason I'm even here."

O'Reilly's frowned. "Look, we're doing this and we're doing it the *proper* way. She'll get to see you when you're down on the field and everything is gonna be okay. You even get a little bouquet of flowers!"

"So what's it gonna be?" Patrick asked impatiently.

Grace gave me a sad smile. I squeezed her hand and said, "Hey, it's okay. Just text me and we can meet up after the ceremony's over. Sound good?" She nodded and headed off with the other formally dressed guys and gals. I was left glaring at my esteemed educators who I wanted to kick right in the throat for ruining this for me.

I was still giddy about being called her date, though. I rode that high all the way through to halftime.

When the final whistle blew, we were up 27-6. Everybody was talking about the other team's wide receiver breaking his arm in the shower a few days before the game and it was apparently why they sucked so bad. Serves him right. He was the one who leaked Victoria's nudes. He deserved a lot more than a busted arm, in my humble opinion.

Normally there would be an elaborate cheer performed by Kara and her little band of assholes, but the members of Homecoming Court were quickly ushered down onto the field. They only had about a half-hour to get this over with before the game was scheduled to resume. O'Reilly was out of breath from yelling at everyone to fall in line and Patrick was sweating like a whore in church.

Grace stuck out like a sore thumb. Everyone else was in light blues and whites and reds, but the black and purple dress that complimented the streaks in her hair made her the most different looking person there. Everyone else was conventionally attractive. Kara, Ashley, Stacey. Those kinds of girls. The cheerleaders. But Grace was beautiful. Even though she thought this whole thing was stupid and probably a big joke, part of me thought it was really great to see her get to shine in front of everyone. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who thought she looked amazing in that dress.

It was more of a "Cheerleader and Football Team Celebration" than an actual Homecoming Court. Spencer, Charles, Bruce White, Frank, and a couple of other guys I didn't know took the field as esteemed members of the Court, sweat still dripping from their brows and dirt covering their uniforms. I felt bad that some of the girls would be forced to hug them.

When they reached the center of the field, the applause died down and the ceremony began. I made sure to take pictures so she and I could laugh about it afterward.

## Ashley

I knew I looked hot. Kara made sure I got the best dress the store had to offer. It cost over two hundred dollars. It was worth every penny. But getting to show the world my dress wasn't the highlight of the day. That came about five minutes later.

Patrick gave some speech about how good we all looked and it made me physically cringe. I remembered Kara telling me about how he was perving on that Jenny girl and the thought that he was going to be staring at each of us when we stepped forward to accept our rewards for winning Prince and Princess was too much to handle. Then O'Reilly stepped forward, thanked everyone for being there, and began the main event.

"For the Freshman," he began. "So-and-So and So-and-So!" I forget who won. I was too busy thinking of who was to come.

The Sophomores elected Spencer and Frank to go for Prince and myself and Michelle to go for Princess. A really hard decision for my classmates to make, huh? As much as it hurt to lose out on being Queen, I knew it would be my time next year to win it all. I just had to be patient. Kara promised me that I would be repaid for this.

There was elation when Spencer won, as was to be expected. He was currently leading us to a Homecoming Game victory and was the second most popular guy in school. Frank didn't even try to win this. He told us that he thought it was stupid and would drop out if he could. Admirable, really.

"For the Juniors, Bruce White and Stacey Milner!"

Modest reaction for them. Bruce made some lewd gesture that drew a chorus of laughter. Stacey tried her best to not be near him when it came time for the "couples' photo" everyone was expected to get with their co-winner. He pulled her into a bear hug, his sweat-stained jersey staining her perfect dress.

"And for the Seniors... Charles Bruxton and... Grace Carlise?"

O'Reilly's voice was little more than a whisper. There was silence when Grace won. Silence capped off by O'Reilly's confusion.

Who could have predicted that the little punk rock princess Grace Carlisle would end up winning Homecoming Princess? I think everyone just assumed that O'Reilly made a mistake and said the wrong name. It's apparently happened before. Not even Grace knew what was happening. The look on her face? Priceless. You'd think she just shit her pants right in the middle of the field. Patrick had to give her a nudge to step forward and accept her bouquet. Only the winners walked away with one so she was one of the lucky ones.

After Charles was forced to abandon Franchesca and be seen with another girl, everyone who got nominated for the Court had to stick around and take pictures as a group before the winners were taken aside to give interviews for the school paper. I could barely contain my laughter while some Junior tried to win a Pulitzer for reporting on how I felt about moving on to the final vote. Kara was on the verge of tears, too, but she played it off as being upset over not getting to win the second biggest crown of the year.

Phase One: Complete.

Most of the girls on the squad were mortified that Kara lost and were trying desperately to console her.

"It had to have been a mistake," Casey swore when Kara rejoined the rest of the squad on the sidelines. "There's no way that *thing* could win."

"Maybe it was a joke," Heather offered. "Like, they saw her name and they voted for her to embarrass her. Or maybe to get back at you for something stupid."



Michelle was strangely silent and Lauren gave Kara a very awkward pat on the back and said, "Hey, it's okay. There's always Prom."

"Thank you, Lauren," she said. "I know."

*No. We will win it next year.*

Lauren basically said my biggest dream without even realizing. I was hoping we would still be a couple by this time next year so there was the chance of us winning Queen and Queen together, an Arlington City High first. I mean, why couldn't we? We were the coolest girls in the grade and everyone loved us. It was probably my biggest pipe dream. I think I could swing it, with or without Kara's support.

What can I say? I was in love.

## Tracy

In the end, I did it.

Looking back on it, I regret it, but I had to do it. They gave me the chance to be their friend and I took it. And yeah, they were nice to me. Letting me eat with them at lunch and inviting me to hang out with them once or twice a month. But it didn't last. I wasn't cool and didn't have their level of people skills. I was just the follower that did what they asked and they repaid me to the degree they deemed satisfactory and that was it.

It still shocks me that they were willing to do all of this for some petty revenge. Nobody benefited from it and everyone lost a lot of respect for Kara and Ashley and the others, as if they had any for them to begin with. Grace didn't become a superstar or anything, but a lot of people felt terrible when they heard that she died. They would tell their friends that they blamed themselves for ever laughing at her.

Knowing what I know now, this was arguably the biggest mistake of my life. Even worse than the incident with Beth, Lauren, and Kate at the locker room. I would argue all of that happened *because* of what I did during that Homecoming Game.

## Beth

Grace was still shocked when she left the field. But not angry-shocked or scared-shocked. She was happy.

I walked to her expecting her to smash the flowers with her heels. I thought she'd kick over a trashcan and cuss out anyone who walked by her. I thought she was going to backhand Patrick for pushing her forward to accept her bouquet and hit O'Reilly over and over until he was knocked out cold for making his dopey little "Seriously? *Her?*" look when she wasn't looking.

But she was happy. Genuinely happy.

We left the game early, though not before everyone was lining up to congratulate her. From lowly Freshman to mighty Seniors. Teachers, parents, press, coaches. Everyone and anyone who got a moment alone with her gave their well-wishes. I'd never seen her so elated. Not even when we were together. It was so amazing. She was happy. I was happy. Life was good.

We barely made it into the relative seclusion of the parking lot before she kissed me. The thought of being caught frightened me, but I became lost in her embrace and the rest of the world didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was the two of us.

"Let's win that fucking crown," I said when she pulled away. She giggled like a little kid.

For the rest of the night and all of Saturday morning, we prepared for the dance. Getting her nails done, getting her hair done, finding new jewelry to match the dress. Convincing her to try some makeup besides the eyeliner was difficult, but we got the best stylist we could to do her up like a goddess. It was weird actually acting like a "girl" for a change with her. Usually it was just eating and talking about bands and video games and stuff. She could be surprisingly girly if she wanted to. I loved her no matter what she was.

She was nearly unrecognizable when all was said and done.

"I love you."

I'd been wanting to say it for a while now, but it never seemed right. Even after we had sex for the first time, I didn't know if it was right to say it. It just seemed too soon. I guess? I'd been a mess trying to figure this stuff out. Grace was my first girlfriend and if movies have taught me anything, it's that dropping the "Love Bomb" could ruin a relationship.

"I love you, too."

Just hearing that was better than dates and kissing and sex and everything else. It was the most satisfying and relieving thing I'd ever heard before or since. It was all worth it. We were gonna be together forever. I just knew it.

Grace and I entered the school together and people were delighted to see her. She was like the belle of the ball. Even Ashley came up to say hello. She didn't look irritated or jealous that she dethroned Kara. She was taking it extremely well.

"I'm really happy for you," she said. "And hey, don't worry about Kara. There's always Prom! Just don't think she's gonna be so easy on you, though." She winked and gave me a nod as if I was just another face in the crowd.

Kara, clad in the sexiest white dress I have ever seen in my life, ran over and gave her a hug and said she looked gorgeous. She noticed Grace staring at her like she was insane and began apologizing. "Look, I know I've been a total bitch to you for years and I know we've had our differences before... but I just want you to know that tonight is going to be different. No more petty bullshit. I promise. I want to be different and make things right with you. Can we move on?"

“Um... yeah!” Grace said, shaking off her reservations to be speaking to her mortal enemy. “Yeah, that sounds great! And you look amazing, too!”

“Aww, stop,” Kara said with a playful smile. “Well, hey, I’m gonna go inside. See you there!” She also gave me an indifferent smile before leaving with Ashley to rejoin their group of cheerleader friends by the stairway.

“Aren’t you popular?” I joked.

“Oh, shut up,” she said. But I knew she was secretly loving this. Even the biggest loners secretly crave human attention to some degree. Grace wasn’t a sociopath or anything. I knew she wanted more friends, even if she would never admit it. That night might actually have been her chance to make some.

Grace stepped off to use the bathroom and I waited around in the hallway. Lauren Bradshaw arrived late and we found ourselves alone together. “Oh, hey Beth! I *love* the dress!”

It was nothing compared to the absolutely stunning red number that she was wearing. It really complimented her hair. Light blues and reds should be mandatory dress codes for blondes who want to dress up. “Thank you! Yours looks so good! Where’d you get it?”

“Ashley picked it out! for me” Lauren happily replied. “Speaking of, have you talked to her yet today?”

“Her and Kara came by, but they just wanted to talk to Lauren,” I said.

“Did they tell you the big news?”

*Big news?* “Huh? Uh, no? What big news?”

“Apparently everyone is voting for her to be Homecoming Queen! Isn’t that exciting!” If she didn’t seem so enthusiastic and her tone of voice wasn’t so authentic, I’d have assumed she was kidding. But she was being totally honest with me. “Ashley said she was forcing people to vote for her because of how bad she feels over hurting her. Grace actually has a chance to *win*! Can you believe it?!”

“Um... wow... no. I mean, no, nobody told me this, but... wow.”

“Alright, I gotta go find Ash, but it was nice talking! Find me when we’re in there and we can hang out some more, k?” She smiled sweetly and hurried off, her steps much more adapted to heels than Grace could ever dream to be.

Grace came back out a minute or so later. She could tell I was processing something and asked me what was the matter. I slowly explained everything that Lauren had just told me, taking care to not forget a single detail. I thought she would laugh in my face over it, but instead she gave this little excited chuckle. It was the only thing her body could manage to do as she processed the information I was still trying to process myself.

“Me... Homecoming Queen... holy shit.”

We started to walk towards the gym.

Just like at the football field, Grace stood out like a sore thumb. All the other dresses were short and revealing, sexy and alluring. Grace looked like she was getting ready for a Victorian ball. The others loved her for this. She was the most popular girl in the room. Everyone was absolutely delighted to be able to spend even a second with her. It was like the hallway, but a thousand times more suffocating.

I was happy for her, though. She deserved it. Years of being the outcast who just accepted that she was different can really hurt someone’s self-esteem, especially someone like Grace. This was like a second chance to show people what I saw in her. She wasn’t some confrontational asshole who manipulated people and lied to get ahead. She was good. She was fearless. She was loving. She could make you feel more loved than anyone you’ve ever met in your life.

She proved how fearless she really is when Patrick made the announcement for the Homecoming Court to assemble on the stage with their dates.

Overlooking the gym floor, these lucky eighteen were given the luxury treatment. Candy, flowers, commemorative sashes that read “Homecoming Court 2018” in big red and gold letters. They even made T-Shirts for the occasion. The members of the Court got them for free while we would pay \$20 for them. They were simple black shirts with white text in the middle, but they had a hundred shining stars surrounding the words. I made sure to buy one so I could match with my awesome girlfriend when this was all said and done.

## **HOMECOMING A NIGHT WE’LL NEVER FORGET 10-13-18**

Knowing Ash the way I do now, I know she stole this from the Carrie musical. It should have been the major red flag that made me grab Grace’s hand and rush her to safety. But I didn’t know a thing about musical theater and only had the most bare knowledge of the film, so I just passed it off as a quote they stole from some Reddit thread or Instagram story from someone’s poetry book or something. That’s my biggest regret. I failed her. I burned the shirt the next day.

After everyone was assembled, I started to feel kinda bad that Grace was up there all alone. In a perfect world, I’d be up there kissing her like the other couples in the room.

*Maybe next year...*

Grace wasn’t the only one without a date, though, so that put my mind at ease a bit. Ashley had flown solo this year, but rumors of her and Spencer becoming an item had been swirling more and more lately. Spencer himself was dateless, too, and spent the night with his buddies, though he had been making goo-goo eyes at some of the cheerleaders all night long. Bruce White was up there all alone, but he had the football guys to screw around with so I guess that counts for something. Even Kara Alderman and Ashley Williams themselves had ended up going dateless. I had to imagine it was not for lack of trying on the part of the guys. She was the most desirable girl in the state. I bet she had to beat guys away with a baseball bat just to get to her car.

Principal Patrick and Mr. O’Reilly waved to the crowd and the Court and approached the microphone set off to the side of the stage. “Uh, hi! Greetings, everyone!” O’Reilly said. “Tonight has been an amazing success and it wouldn’t be complete without the crowning of our Homecoming King and Queen!”

Applause broke out and spread like a disease through the crowd. Even I found myself cheering for them despite thinking most of them to be immature douchebags.

“We know ya’ll aren’t here to listen to a couple a’ geezers talk so could the Princes and Princesses please step forward?” Patrick asked, eager to finish this.

And they did. Ashley and Bruce and Charles and Grace and Spencer and all the others. Kara didn’t seem very perturbed to be stuck in the background. She actually seemed very happy. Like she couldn’t control her joy. I guess I had her all wrong. I figured her to be the really vain type that hates anyone that isn’t one of her friends. Ashley, too. Whatever Kara had said to her after she stole my money must really have hit home.

*Maybe she can change, after all...*

Patrick held up the comically large envelope that held the results inside. “And now, ladies and gentlemen, the votes have been tallied and only two may win.” He took his time opening the envelope and studying the card inside. I guess he must have thought himself to be a gameshow host or something because it dragged on for a long time. Then his nose crinkled and he gave the note a second glance. He composed himself and yelled out...

“BRUCE WHITE AND GRACE CARLISLE!”

Silence.

Total silence.

Only myself, Ashley, and Kara were cheering. Not even Patrick or O'Reilly clapped.

I stopped as soon as I realized I was alone in the audience. All I heard was my girlfriend's name and I clapped. Like one of those Pavlov dogs. Her name brought me joy. But my joy turned to ashes in my mouth. I had no idea what was going on. My mind raced. I actually felt dizzy from thinking too hard.

*How did she beat ASHLEY? And how did Bruce beat Charles and Spencer?*

Grace was stunned. Bruce was jumping up and down, whooping like a gorilla. His dress shirt was untucked and his tie was swinging around like helicopter blades. He was a mess and he was loving it. Spencer and Charles laughed their asses off at their teammate's little display. He ran over to wrap Patrick in a bear hug and then accepted his crown from O'Reilly, a little cheap hunk of plastic that was sitting on a big poofy pillow. Instead of letting O'Reilly give out the crowns, Bruce accepted Grace's on her behalf. He sauntered over, dancing along to the music playing in his mind. He had the crown clenched tight and used those massive meaty paws to place it on her head.

Nobody saw him snatch the microphone from the stand. They were too busy staring at him making a fool of himself and Grace slowly stepping forward to the edge of the stage. The crown went on her head and the microphone went up to his lips.

“Wanna know why Grace kept saying no when I asked her to Homecoming this week? It's because she couldn't wait to say yes in my truck when this shit is finished!” His massive hand flew out and smacked Grace hard on the ass, sending her leaping in the air from shock. The echo of the smack echoed around the room.

The world stood still. It took me a second to actually grasp what he had said. It took everyone a second to hear it.

All it took was a single burst of laughter from one of the guys to send the rest of the gym into a torrent of frenzied glee. From the Freshmen to the Seniors, males, females, and anything in between, athletes and nerds. Nobody could resist laughing. Kara and Ashley were on their knees and clutching their stomachs. Kylie was screeching like a banshee.

But it wasn't over.

“Guy's she's not laughing! You wanna know the difference between a joke and my dick? Grace can't take a joke!”

Frank was rolling on the stage. The guy next to me was dry heaving. The girls near me were shouting out words like “SLUT!” and “WHORE!” One extremely ballsy girl from the middle of the gym even screamed out “FUCKING DYKE!” with no shame to speak of. Everyone heard it, but nobody said a word in protest. Only laughter. It was chaos.

But it wasn't over.

“You know why Grace is like fried chicken? After you've finished sucking on the thighs and breasts, all you have left is a greasy box to put your bone in!”

This seemed to awaken O'Reilly and Patrick from their collective trance. They ran over and ripped the microphone from his grasp. Bruce treated the mic like his precious football, refusing to give it up so easily. The feedback was deafening everyone in the room after their struggle for him to give it up. When they ripped it from his hands, Patrick nearly fell off the edge of the stage. This only made people laugh harder.

The laughter died as everyone covered their ears from the screeching cry from the speakers, but it picked up right where it left off when Grace began to cry. Their whipping boy was finally broken. Her makeup that was done carefully by trained professionals for the occasion streaked down her face. Her hair that was crafted by the gods so no strand was out of place was a bird nest after began to violently rip at the curls.

And they continued to laugh. And I was helpless to do anything to stop them.

Kara was sobbing into Ashley's shoulder and Ashley was struggling to breathe. Bruce held his arms high as he was marched off to face the consequences of his actions. Stacey and Kylie were laughing with each other when Grace suddenly rose and sprinted for the exit. Brooke was standing right there when Grace's virgin heels betrayed her and she slipped, skidding violently across the gym floor. Francesca Phelps and Valerie Black pointed and laughed at Grace's underwear that had been revealed when her gown got torn and pulled up halfway to her chest. Dwayne and Brad pointed so everyone got a chance to see. Most of the basketball team ran out after her to get one last look at her panties, their phones held out and the flashes of their cameras illuminating the darkened gym behind them.

Seven people did not so much as pretend to smile during the whole ordeal.

Me. Spencer. Charles. Lauren. Patrick. O'Reilly.

That was how I knew exactly who was to blame for this.

## Ashley

It went better than I ever could have dreamed of. That weasel-faced bitch became the laughing stock of the school district. Kara didn't tell me what Bruce was going to do, but she said it was going to be fun. I should have assumed it would be absolutely gross. Was the smack on her ass excessive? Absolutely, but seeing her jump around and squeal like a pig made it so fucking worth it. Whatever Kara did to make him go along with this, she deserves a fucking medal.

When Grace face planted when she tried to run away, I thought I was going to pee myself. Whoever was operating the spotlight in the back had a perfect view of it and tracked her the whole way to the doors. I owed them seven minutes in heaven for that tracking shot because I got a lifetime of bliss because of their efforts. Some poor idiot got hit in the head with the heel from her shoes and that sent me spiraling even harder. I'd never laughed so much in my life.

Kara needed ten minutes to calm down before she could actually speak. Kylie joined us up on stage as soon as it happened, which makes me believe Kara told her that something was going down, and she and Stacey were chittering like birds about it.

I just enjoyed it all. The laughter, her tears, everything. It took me longer than it should have before I finally inhaled. I was so dizzy from laughing for so long, I nearly passed out. But it was worth it. I was so glad that people were recording it because I wanted to fall asleep to the view from the audience.

After the dance, we partied until the sun came up. The comedown from the coke we did made me sleep until three the next day. Thankfully I didn't or else I'd have missed my date with Lauren. We were going to watch movies and talk about the dance.

Lauren seemed really upset about the whole situation with Grace. "Did you hear what that one girl yelled out? She called her a *dyke*, Ash. Why would she do that? That's so cruel."

Everyone heard the rumors that Grace was gay. I didn't know if it was true and honestly I didn't care. I hated her as a person in general. Not because of who she slept with. If it was true, though, I hoped people would understand that they were allowed to hate her for any other reason besides her sexuality. Like me and Kara.

"Yeah, that was really not cool."

"So why were you laughing?"

*Because I need Kara to like me.* "You know I had nothing to do with that, right? That was all Kara and she even bragged about it at Charles' afterparty."

"I know, but..."

"And I had no idea someone would say that about her."

She sighed. "I know. I know. I'm sorry. I'm not blaming you."

I held her hand. It was buttery from the popcorn. "You know I'd never let them talk about you like that if we came out together. Right?"

Lauren smiled, her concerns about that emo loser fading away. "What do you mean?"

"Will you be my girlfriend?" She seemed surprised that I asked so I, like an idiot, decided to spit up every thought that was in my head to sell myself. "I mean, we've been doing this kinda thing for a while now and I really love spending time with you and you're really pretty and cool and, like, I know we're going to be going to Prom together—"

"Yes!" she exclaimed, laughing a little after. "Yes, I wanna be your girlfriend!"

I'd never been so happy to be shut up before in my life. "Okay!"



We held hands and kissed a little and held each other. I'd never been happier in my life. After we were done being all cute and shit, we watched the movie while holding each other as if we were going to drift away without support. It was the happiest I'd ever been in my entire life.

I didn't know how the school would react to the whole thing at Homecoming. I wasn't worried, though. Kara had my back. One thing that was for certain was that Grace Carlisle would never mess with us again. If she did, we would destroy her. Kara and I got to remind everyone who was in charge of this school and our lone detractor was dealt with swiftly and righteously.

It was all so perfect. I was officially the heir to the school. I got the girl. I buried my enemies alive. I had a newfound purpose in life.

This was it. Everything I ever wanted. It was over.

I won.

## **MENDING FENCES**

## Beth

My minor sabbatical from that pathetic excuse for a high school gave me the most precious resource a human being has: time. I had lots and lots of time. I spent every second of my self-imposed exile wisely. Anyone else would have spent those days off playing video games or watching porn or staring at the ceiling for hours on end. I did not have the luxury of sitting on my ass and doing nothing productive. My time was spent as best as I could and even though I would have a lot of work to makeup, it was all worth it. I needed time to think.

Ashley's phone call told me two things I would have otherwise been in the dark about while I was away. I considered answering, but I was more curious about hearing her stream of consciousness than interjecting myself in a conversation and distracting her.

The first was that she was cracking without other like-minded people to support her. She was alone without Spencer and her little cheerleading squad she abandoned and Michelle and the rest of them. If she is calling *me* up for help, something is seriously wrong. She said that she "needed me." Was it because I talked her out of killing herself a few days earlier? Did I really change her life by telling her to trust her basic survival instinct and to not paint the ceiling red with her brains? It was very humanizing to see her at the end of her rope...

The second was Lauren was becoming more self-reliant. She did not need me anymore. Ever since the party, she had been pushing me away. I always knew this day would eventually come, but I refused to dwell on it because the thoughts hurt me so badly. Everyone who has ever loved me leaves me. It's how it is. The difference here is she just needed to be reminded of how much she loved and needed me. She was still around and I could still win her back.

I did have reason to believe Spencer Barnett intended to make a move on her. I had been preparing for days to deal with that future as well as prove that Lauren could not do this without me. When I made my sullen return to school on Monday, I would set events in motion that would ensure our love would not only survive, but thrive.

The first step was ensuring Homecoming went off without a hitch.

## Lauren

I might have become a little overly optimistic, but my life was looking really great going into the week of Homecoming.

I had an amazing soon-to-be-official boyfriend that was getting healthier every day. No one had heard anything about retaliation from the basketball team all weekend so I really began to think we were in the clear. My friends were all making plans for going out to get our hair and nails done before the dance. My grades were back up. I wasn't crying myself to sleep thinking about Beth as much anymore.

Life was good.

The only thing that could have phased me was seeing Beth walking back down the halls early on Monday. She was wearing long sleeves again. Part of me wanted to run over to check on her, but I couldn't bring myself to make the trip. It was like there were cinder blocks tied to my feet and I was stuck at the bottom of a river. Drowning. As much as I wanted to be the best friend who would do anything for her, I was still really scared that she did something evil.

She saw me looking at her and approached me. It looked like she hadn't gotten a wink of sleep in the time she was away from school. "Hey." She sounded tired. Like, fully burnt out.

"Hey."

"Sorry I missed the meeting with Vinny," she said. Her voice was cracking more with every word, but not the way someone sounds when they're really drunk or high. Some kind of uncanny valley of being normal and something being very wrong.

"It's okay," I said. "Are you still sick? You—"

"I can't afford to miss another day," she murmured. "But yeah, I know I look like shit." We laughed a little. I was going to ask what she had, but she spoke first. "Hey, have you seen Ash? She called me and I wanted to check in with her."

"Oh, uh, I think I saw her by her locker? But that was, like, ten minutes ago."

"Ahh, okay. See ya."

And like that, she was gone. No asking if I was okay, no asking how the meeting went. I thought about chasing after her, but she melted into the crowd before I could get the chance.

Was she mad at me? Did she resent me for dumping her? Was she too embarrassed to talk to me? Am I the bad guy here? Did I throw everything away?

Spencer showed up earlier than he said he would and we went to hang out by his locker for a little while. Even though I was really happy to see him, I couldn't shake the feeling that Beth hated me. It was honestly kinda soul-crushing. We were so in love for so long and then it was just over. The more time I had to think, the more I began to wonder if I overreacted and ruined the best thing that ever happened to me for nothing.

Spencer slid his arm around my waist and held me close. We didn't want to be public until Homecoming so we could only enjoy it for a second before he pulled his arm back.

*What happened before happened. It's done. I'm with Spencer now. She's going to have to deal with it. I'm happy and she will find someone else soon, too. I know it.*

## Ashley

The first bell was only minutes from ringing when Beth approached me. I'd never seen someone look so exhausted. Nevertheless, she had a smile on her face and part of me was just glad to know she was okay. Ish.

"You've looked better," I said, knowing she wouldn't be offended by a light jab.

She smirked. "Yeah, I've been better. But I can't miss any more school or my mom is gonna kill me so..." She held her arms up a little. "Here I am!"

"I'm glad you're back," I said. "We could have really used you at the meeting."

Her smile faded. "I'm sorry I wasn't here. I just needed a few days away, you know?" I understood that feeling more than anyone. "How did it go, by the way?"

"I think it worked! Vinny said he was going to keep his guys in check and Spencer and Frank agreed that they weren't going to start anything. Frank is pissed, but what are you gonna do? I think threatening both teams with losing their seasons really did the trick."

"You and I both know O'Reilly wouldn't actually follow through with that."

"Maybe," I admitted. "But it worked. So who really cares."

She looked relieved that it was over. I know because I'm pretty sure I made the same face after the assembly. "I don't know why Lauren didn't want to tell me this," she said suddenly. "I mean, she didn't text or call or anything when it was done."

I frowned. "Wait, really?"

"All I knew about the meeting was from what you said in your voicemail," she said. "Sorry I never called back, by the way. It's just... you know..."

"So nobody told you *anything* about it?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, nothing." She lowered her voice. "Something's been going on with Lauren lately. She's been really distant and..." She waited for a couple of girls to pass by before finishing. "I think she's going to leave me for good."

I found it a little funny that she was telling me— Lauren's ex who would have sold the world to get her back— that Lauren might be single again soon. But I kept that to myself. Even though we've had our issues, Beth was there for me when I needed someone. She had no reason to actually show up, but she did. If I could do her a solid now, I might feel like I repaid the debt that I know she would never expect me to resolve.

"What? No, come on, she won't leave you."

"I know I haven't been the best girlfriend lately, but I can't lose her," she said, pleading. "I can't. Not again, not like this." She took a couple deep breaths. "If there is anything you can do or say to her, I'm *begging* you to—"

"Hey, hey, no worries," I said. "I'll talk to her. Come by our table at lunch today and you can talk it over with me as the middleman or whatever. Have a little mafia-style sit down," I said with a smile.

Beth reached out and hugged me. "Thank you so so so much. You're a lifesaver! If you ever need anything, just let me know and it's done, I *promise*."

She was actually really sweet when she was being vulnerable. How could I not try to help her with this? It's not like I don't have experience talking to Lauren or anything.

So I said, "Hey, no problem! Just leave it to me and everything will be okay."

Did I believe it? I really don't know.

## Beth

I had been studying Rose's movements for two years now. Ever since Grace had told me about the cushy gig she had working as an assistant in the front office, I sought that job out more than anything else in the whole school. When the guy who was working up there got caught breaking into the system and changing his grades, I swooped in and took the job.

Besides needing to listen to Rose's dumb soap operas she watched on the small TV she kept above her desk, it was easily not the worst way to spend an hour every couple of days. The most useful skill I had acquired from working in the front office was managing to forge the handwriting of the teachers. Seeing their writing all day allowed me the chance to sneak bits of paper or old notes and letters home so I could practice. I think I do a rather good impression of Mr. O'Reilly.

*Vinny,*

*I understand you recently met with Student Council regarding the on-going prank war between the basketball and the football teams. I wanted to meet with you at the start of fifth period to discuss your agreement and ensure we're all on the same page.*

*Mr. O'Reilly*

My self-professed mastery of forgery was truly being put to the test now. This was my trump card, my ace in the hole. If things got serious and I felt the only course of action was to get Vinny involved, I would slip the note into his locker and meet with him. I was grinning like a child at the prospect of actually showing the world just how committed I was to keeping the peace.

The vents at the top of the lockers were my ticket to avoiding a face-to-face interaction with him. Vinny is not an idiot and he would know something was up as soon as he saw the name on the note. Why would O'Reilly go through all the effort to keep the meeting clandestine? He was the principal, even if it was in name only some days. He was not two secret lovers passing notes back and forth to keep the passion alive. He wasn't me and Lauren. Or me and Grace.

I had four days to make this work. I counted my lucky stars and hoped every single thing could somehow work in my favor. They say no plan survives contact with the enemy and I am inclined to agree with them. However, I have been dealing with the enemy's shit for two years now. I think I can manage whatever they manage to do to ruin my day. The seeds were planted and I just had to wait and see how they would grow.

## Kate

I'd been in a massive rut lately and I couldn't help but feel it was all my fault. It seemed like my friends were getting bored of me. Ashley was throwing herself at making Homecoming a massive success and Lauren was too worried about Spencer and Beth to have time for anything else. It made me feel like I wasn't doing enough to make them want to spend time with me. Was I the problem? Or would putting myself out there just end up with me getting in their way?

I was standing at my locker after the last bell rang just kinda killing time before my bus showed up when I saw her approaching me. She was just out of the corner of my eye, but just knowing she was there made me tense up. I was not interested in ever speaking to her again.

Tracy stood beside me, half-smiling at me. "Hey."

As much as I wanted to just ignore her until she left, I was too nice for that. Manners and basic human decency are so overrated. "Hey."

"Can we talk?"

I shut my locker and leaned against it. "I really don't want to."

"Just hear me out. Please."

My parents raised me to always see the good in people. To an almost unhealthy degree, they taught me from when I was first born that even the worst people are able to change. If they actually want to or not is up to them, but it *is* possible.

This has an upside and a downside. The upside is I'm always looking for the good in someone and am willing to look past their faults to try to help them be better. It's something I was hoping to do when I became a lawyer. Even if my clients were the scum of the earth, maybe a little therapy and some time reflecting on their actions could change them.

The downside is I went my whole childhood trying to see the good in people and it blinded me to just how awful they really were. People like Beth and Tracy were wakeup calls to how people will cheat and lie their way to the top, giving no thought to who they hurt in the process. Ashley was the exception, but that was because she got the rug pulled out from under her and stopped having Kara to hide behind when the heat got too much for her to handle.

I was a mess. A stunted, broken mess.

Was it a mistake that I was willing to give Tracy a chance to make up to me for what she did? Probably. Honestly it was incredibly stupid and I deserved to be punished a second time for it. What she did was pure evil and it could have ruined all four of our lives. Did she learn *nothing* from what happened with Grace or the stuff with Victoria?

"Why should I?"

"Because what I did was terrible—"

"Yeah. It was."

She was completely unperturbed by my interruption. "And it's all I've been able to think about since it happened. I think about it every single day and it kills me that I was willing to do that to them." She started to pace back and forth. "Just thinking about it makes me sick to my fucking stomach. It's the biggest regret of my life. I just..." She stopped and sighed, every regret she had on full display for the world to see. "I want to make things right. Somehow, I don't know how, but I just need to make things right with you guys. Especially you, you had no business being there." She looked at me with bloodshot eyes on the verge of tears. "Please."

My parents taught me that everyone deserves a second chance, no matter what they do. I love them more than life itself and it would kill them to know that I didn't do the right thing. Even if she had been a terrible person, I could tell she was being sincere. So for better or worse, I looked her dead in the eyes and put on my best Beth impression possible.

"I'll try to talk to Lauren. But it's up to you to make things right. I'm not sticking up for you if you're not being honest."

"I am!" Tracy said, her will to live being given a second shot of adrenaline. "I swear, you won't regret this! Just-just text me whenever and say when you guys wanna meet up and I'll be there! I promise!"

She may have really screwed me over before, but I knew when someone was being honest. So, for better or worse, I called up Lauren and asked her if we could meet up after school on Wednesday. It was the next time we all had Student Council together so I figured the three of us could talk in the cafeteria or something.

Tracy was elated and kept thanking me. I just wanted her to leave me alone until Lauren and I could figure out what to do. I told her I'd text her when I got the details. All I could do after that is hope I wouldn't get burned again.



## Spencer

Frank was still pissed about the whole situation with Vinny. Dude sure knew how to hold a grudge. The prospect of needing to go to Homecoming with a random cheerleader to fulfill Ashley's plan also annoyed him. He was quietly mourning Michelle. We all knew it. Instead of crying, though, Frank was the type of guy to get angry at something and focus on it until he had an aneurism.

"It's just *bullshit*!" he said as we ate our bland chicken sandwiches made of patties as thin as the buns they were served on. "I mean, we just promised that we weren't going to do any stupid shit this year and now we gotta do *this* just to make him happy? Why not just keep us far apart and let things blow over? I don't even want to go to Homecoming this year!"

"Don't let it get to you, man," I said. I was as tired of being around Vinny as anyone and if I wasn't going with Lauren, I wouldn't be happy about an arranged date either, but at least I knew when to keep my mouth shut.

"It's just ridiculous," he said before eating a handful of unseasoned waffle fries. "I mean, why do we have to put up with this?" Chunks of potato flew out of his mouth. He really did not think before he acted sometimes. Not that I haven't done the same thing before either. I'm an impulsive fuck, but at least I apologize after spitting all over my friend's lunch tray.

"It's just one night," I offered.

Frank rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

"If any of the basketball guys hear you talking like that, we're never getting a cease fire," I warned.

"Fuck the cease fire. I want to kick this guy in the balls."

I lowered my voice. "Sometimes, I do, too, but..." I quickly glanced down at my leg and hoped he got the point.

He sighed and said, "I'm sorry, man. Have you been doing okay? We really haven't talked a lot since the accident and I'm just so pissed off about..."

I didn't want him to say it. I knew that would make it real to him. More real than being at the funeral in some ways. "I'm doing good," I said. "Better than good, honestly."

He saw that little glimmer in my eye. That glimmer shared by every teenage boy who ever got past first base with somebody. He grinned at me and said, "*Ohhh*, I see what you mean." He looked over at the girls' table to see if they could hear him. Confident they wouldn't, he leaned in and whispered, "You and Ashley are back together, huh?"

I could feel my face flush. "What? No, no—"

He grinned even wider. "Holy shit, you totally are!"

I laughed a little. "Trust me, it's not about Ashley."

"Look at you, man, your dimples are like craters! When did it happen?"

I hated my dimples. They used to call me Peaches and Cream back when I was little. I never understood why, but it always made me smile because of how dumb it was and then they'd laugh at me even more. It was a never ending cycle. Of all the names I had to get, why did it have to be *that one*?

"I'm serious, man, we're not back together."

"Heh. Sure you aren't."

"I'm not! Honest!"

"Wait then who are you with? And don't lie and say you aren't with somebody because I've seen this look on your face before and that was after you and Ash hooked up."

I fought the urge to look over at Lauren and spill the beans. We promised we wouldn't go public until Homecoming and I wasn't going to risk ruining our night because I wanted to brag about it to Frank. Sure, we spoke in kinda sorta very graphic detail about the girls we'd been with before because we were basically brothers and gave each other advice on this kinda stuff, but this was different. Until we were *officially dating*, no one could know Lauren and I were hooking up. I felt like I was lying to Frank about it, and yeah I absolutely was, but he could find out when we got our crowns and become high school royalty.

"You'll find out," I finally said after weighing the answer in my head for a second or two.

He gave me an enthusiastic pat on the good shoulder. "My MAN!" Half the cafeteria was now staring at me. It made me blush all over again.

"Anyways," I said, desperate to change the subject from myself, "who're you asking?"

"Nobody. Solo is the new thing."

We hadn't spoken about Michelle since she died. I know they were close. Really close. He was constantly asking me for advice on how to make her happy and not screw things up with a girl who remained nameless the entire time they were together. When they were sorta-kind-not-really-absolutely fucking behind everyone's back, we all knew it, but they never decided to go public about it. I was the only person who actually knew what their deal was, but I wasn't going to snitch. I could tell that things with her had been hitting him hard since the funeral. It might have been why he was so angry lately. He just needed something to be mad at. If he wasn't mad, he was sad. I could relate to that all too well.

"But you're still going, right?"

"Of course!" he exclaimed. "I need to see my man win Homecoming King, right?"

Tom, Dwayne, and Jamar walked up to us. "Jesus, get a room," Tom said grinning.

"Only if he lets me past second base," Frank said with a wink.

There is only one thing I will say about the subject: of all the men in the world, big or small, fat or thin, smart or dumb, hairy as Sasquatch or sheered like a sheep, Frank is the absolute last man on God's green earth that I would go gay for. Love him like a brother, but not a *stepbrother*. I couldn't wait for my brother to meet his new in-law, though. She looked so cute that day. I wanted to kiss her so badly. It was agonizing not staring at her when he asked me who I was smiling like an idiot over.

*Just a few more days. Then everybody will know.*

## Lauren

I couldn't help myself from watching Spencer hobble around on his crutches while I was sitting with Ashley, Casey, and Heather. I just kinda stopped and stared at him. It was sad to see him struggling. I wished there was something I could do to help.

"Lauren?" Ashley asked. "You there?"

I blinked and snapped back to reality. "Yeah. No, sorry. I didn't sleep much last night." I forced a yawn. Forcing a yawn ended up making me yawn for real. It's weird how that works. "So what's going on?"

"We were just talking about plans for Saturday afternoon," she said. "You know. Hair. Nails. That kinda stuff."

"Yeah, totally," I said, horrifically absent-mindedly. How they could not notice something was up was beyond me. "Just text me the details and I'll be there."

It seems like they did notice something was up because Ashley whispered something to Casey and Heather walked away and Ashley leaned in close to me. "Hey, look, I don't wanna pry or anything, but are you... you know... okay? You've been kind of a mess lately."

I gave a dry chuckle. "You always knew what to say to make me feel special," I whispered. She smiled, too. "It's a really long story."

"Well you have ten seconds to tell me because I invited Beth over to talk things out 'cause she's been worried sick that you guys are falling apart," Ashley whispered as she craned her head to wave Beth over from a table across the cafeteria. My heart began to race as she walked over. The words caught in my throat. This shouldn't have been the place for this. Why did she have to drag this out in front of everyone? I knew whatever I said would only make Beth cry and make me look like asshole.

Beth sat down across the table from me, smiling a sad demoralized smile. "Hey, Laur."

"Hey. Beth."

"So I don't know what's been going on with you two, but when she's coming to me for help then I know it's serious." Ashley turned to Beth. "Sorry. By the way. I've been horrible to you since you got to this school so if this is some kind of test to see if I've changed, I wanna make the most of it. And not like last year with... Grace... I promise."

She gave Ashley a genuine smile and I could see her eyes get a little teary. "Oh. Well. Thank you. And, um, no, it actually wasn't a... test or whatever... but that means a lot... and I believe you. Thank you."

"That being said," Ashley continued quietly, "as Lauren's ex and as her girlfriend, I think—"

"Ex," I corrected, feeling as much of the cunt as possible for doing it. Ashley glanced at me, confused. "Ex-girlfriend. We broke up not too long ago." I looked away to avoid eye contact with Beth. It would have made me cry all over again to see it.

"Oh." was all Ashley could say before sinking back in her seat. "But..."

I shifted awkwardly in my seat. Before I could ask what all of this was about, Beth stood up and ran off, nearly taking out two Sophomores as she went. I could hear her whimper before she left. It broke my heart all over again. No matter how angry I was, I still loved her.

"God fucking damnit, Ash, why the fuck did you have to do that?"

"I didn't know!" she swore up and down. "She asked me to talk to you and organize a meet-up at lunch to see if things were okay—"

“You couldn’t have talked to me first to see what was wrong?” I asked, far angrier than I should have been. “Don’t you think this was a talk we could have had at my house or something and not the middle of the goddamn cafeteria?!”

I’d never yelled at her once since we’d first met.

“I’m... I’m so sorry...”

I knew I was being the asshole. She didn’t deserve this. I just let myself get angry. Knowing I was complete human trash, I stood and took off even faster than Beth had. I heard Ashley meekly call out after me, but I wasn’t looking back. I had a thousand eyes on me. If I looked anywhere but the doors out of the cafeteria, I might have a panic attack. The only place I could think to run to was the girls’ locker room.

At least in there, I could cry all by myself.

## Ashley

Things got pretty hard for me in the leadup to Homecoming. I tried to stay on the wagon, but the stress of managing the dance got too much. Add in everything with the basketball team, Spencer, Lauren, Michelle, and my own crap and I was a ticking time bomb that was just waiting to explode. If I didn't start numbing myself, I thought I actually would explode.

So I started drinking. A lot.

I didn't drink so much that I got blackout drunk. Just enough to get me to sleep. I'd do what was expected of me with the Homecoming Committee girls and then get my schoolwork done and then I'd curl up with whatever my Mom left around the house. I really started to like wine. It was sweet. Whatever got me to bed and made it so I didn't dream was nice. I'd wake up with a headache sometimes, but I made sure to chug down water so the hangover wasn't so bad.

Getting off the coke was hard. This made it a little less hard.

I wished I had something to drink when I totally ruined things with Beth and Lauren. I was just trying to help. I horrifically misread the situation between them, but was it really my fault? Beth said they were still together. I knew I had to make things right. I wasn't mad that she yelled at me. Not really. I was more worried about trying to help them work things out so I just kinda rushed them into the conversation and hoped they would work things out. How was I supposed to know just how bad things were between them?

When Lauren and Beth ran away and everyone in the cafeteria stared at me to see just what exactly I did to piss them off, I wanted to sink down in my chair and die.

"What happened with them?" Heather asked as she and Casey returned from the little trip to the guys' table I sent them on, their eyes fixated on Lauren who was just leaving the cafeteria.

The bell couldn't ring soon enough. Third period could wait. I had to find Lauren and make things right. I tried texting Beth to beg her to forgive me and ask her to meet up at some point so I could apologize for real, but she didn't respond. I had a feeling I knew where Lauren would be hiding. We had snuck off to the locker room to makeout or cry more times than we could count when we were dating. Sometimes to do both at the same time.

The lights were off inside, but I could hear quiet sobs from the changing area. I hurried through the bathroom and found Lauren curled up in a ball on the ground. She was such a sad sight. Her mascara was dripping down her cheeks and her nose was running all over the place.

"Go away," she muttered.

"Aww, Lauren... come on, let's get you up on the bench," I said as I gently took her arm and helped her stand up. She tried to protest, but her body followed without resistance. "That's it. Sit down right here. It's okay."

"I shouldn't have yelled at you. I'm so sorry..."

"Shh, shh, it's okay," I said while rubbing her back. "I'm not mad."

She started weeping uncontrollably into my shoulder, handing out tear-filled apology after tear-filled apology. "I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you. I'm so sorry. It's not your fault. I swear I'm not mad. I should have told you." She began to cry harder. "You should have known. I should have told you. I'm so, so sorry."

"What? That you guys broke up? You didn't need to tell me that."

She shook her head. Her forehead collided with my collarbone and I had to suppress a little groan from the impact. "That we're together now."

“We? Who’s we?”

“Spencer.” Her little whimpers and pleas for forgiveness turned to full-blown sobbing now.

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have my suspicions about them actually being a thing. She’d been worrying so much about him and using every excuse she could to get to his house since he got back from the hospital. And she was totally giving him the goo-goo eyes every time they were in a room together. Part of me didn’t want to believe it. I mean, they’re both very special to me and I want them to be happy, but that jealous little asshole voice inside my head said that there was always a chance that she and I could get back together one day. I was glad they’re together. I don’t know.

“You know I’m not mad at you over that. Right? I mean, me and him have been broken up for weeks now. And it’s not like me and him *really dated*, you know what I mean?”

She forced herself to stop crying. She sniffled. “What can I say? You have good taste in guys.” We both laughed and she explained herself while she wiped her eyes with some paper towels. “We started talking while he was in the hospital. And then more when he got home. Like really talking. He made me feel so good about myself. I don’t know. It just happened.”

“Does she know?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t ask you about meeting up before,” I said softly. “That was really stupid of me. Beth said you guys were having trouble and... I don’t know...”

“Don’t blame yourself,” she said. “How were you supposed to know we broke up? And I promise I’m not angry. I just lost my cool. I’m sorry I yelled.”

“You know you should probably tell her, right?” I asked. “Eventually.”

“I’m dreading that.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “She’s gonna find out on Friday anyway, but it might be best if she hears it from me.”

“Why Friday?”

“We’re going to tell everyone we’re dating during Homecoming Court. See if we can win King and Queen together.”

When we first started dating, I always thought about how great it would be for her and I to become Homecoming Queens together. There’s obviously never been a same-sex couple win at ACH and the thought of us being the first was one of those fairy tale dreams everyone has. It never would have worked because of what happened last year, but I figured that this could have been our year. Then we broke up and Spencer and I dated and we were pretty much guaranteed the win. Then *we* broke up and now the two people I imagined standing up on stage with me as I accepted the little plastic crowns were now dating and I was stuck going solo to the dance, if I even went at all.

Life is funny like that sometimes.

“I mean, Spencer is a lock to win King,” I said. “And if you guys are dating for real...”

She crumpled up the paper towel and threw it aside. We watched it land harmlessly on the ground. “Sometimes I feel like I made a mistake,” she said. “Part of me thinks I’m such a fucking idiot for dumping her. I keep thinking I can’t believe I ruined the best thing that ever happened to me. But part of me knows it was never going to work out and it’s better that we’re over.” She shook her head. “What am I gonna do?”

“Well... you could get me an ice pack since you just kicked me in the dick by saying *she* was the best thing that ever happened to you.” After a moment of confusion, we started laughing and it made things a little better. Even if it was just for a second. “Just to be clear, you know I’m not actually mad at you, right?”

“Yes,” she said as she transitioned from laughing to crying to laughing again. “Yes, I kinda figured that out. Fuck.” She laughed harder. “I’m such a mess.”

“No, you’re not. You’re just going through a lot. Believe me, I get it. I do get why you loved her now, though. Even though she absolutely hates me sometimes, she really does have a good heart.”

I made sure not to mention that she talked me out of shooting myself not too long ago because the last thing I needed was Lauren freaking out over me when she already had a dozen things on her plate.

*And I’m the reason she’s so angry all of the time. I ruined her life and she saved mine.*

“I know,” Lauren said. “But we’re better apart.” That was all she would say about it. I could tell she wanted to say something, but I wasn’t going to force it. Instead, she took a deep breath and finally stopped crying. “You know you’ll always have a special place in my heart, right?”

“Well being somebody’s first does have that effect on them,” I said with a grin.

“No, but seriously, I’m...” she pulled away from me so should look at me. Like, *really* look at me. “I’m really sorry. For that night. I shouldn’t have left you. I should have—”

“No, no, come on, don’t worry about that,” I said. “It’s okay. I don’t blame you for leaving.” I was angry for a while. More at myself, though. She was doing what was best for her. “Things didn’t work out. It’s not your fault. It might have been for the best, honestly. So don’t be mad at yourself.” I smiled. “I’ve actually been clean for a little while. I lost track of how long, but maybe a couple of weeks?”

It was a lie. But I wasn’t on coke. So it was something.

“What?” she asked, grinning wide. “Ash, that’s amazing!” She hugged me.

“Taking it day by day, you know?” I asked with an awkward laugh. “Okay but seriously, enough about me. Now we gotta talk about Beth. I think it’s time we work out what you’re going to say to her when you see her next because her finding out at the game is honestly the single worst thing that could happen.”

She shut her eyes. “Awesome.”

## Kate

I heard the news from Adam Turner. He was in our math class, but I barely talked to the guy. He told me that something bad went down with Lauren and Beth and Ashley and they all ran off crying. Everyone was talking about it by the end of the day and somehow I didn't hear about it until second period the next day. With Student Council running tomorrow and the meeting with me, Lauren, and Tracy following that, I figured this was basically a deathblow to any chance of reconciliation.

The idea of Tracy actually being sorry kept popping into my mind. What she did was unforgivable and it was up to Lauren and Beth to forgive her now. If that was even possible, I don't know. I'd give her a second chance, but she'd be at arm's length the entire time.

Wednesday rolled around and I went up to Lauren to ask her if we were still on for after Student Council was over.

"If you want me to be there, I will be," Lauren said, clearly angry. "But I'm not going to let her off so easy. She's a massive fucking bitch and I could give a shit if she lives or dies." My eyes went wide and she exhaled sharply. "Sorry, that was... terrible. I've been in a shitty headspace the past few days."

"I heard about lunch," I said. "Do you wanna... you know? Talk about it? At all?"

She smiled a little. "You're sweet. But no, it's okay. Just one of those things I need to deal with alone, you know?" The bell rang and class was about to start. "I gotta get to class. We can hang out in the gym before Student Council starts. I seriously doubt this will be a long conversation so we should be in and out before the meeting starts."

"Yeah. Yeah, totally, sounds good."

I did my job setting this thing up. Now it was up to Tracy to decide if she actually wanted to make things right. I did my part in setting the whole thing up. I just hoped she would actually make it all worth the effort.



## Tracy

I didn't expect to get to the gym first. I figured since their lockers were closer, I would be the last one to show up. I actually ran to make sure I didn't get there too late and cause them to miss their meeting. The last thing I wanted to do was disrespect them. I figured they were probably talking about what they wanted to say. As long as I kept loose and didn't overthink things, I thought I had a chance of making things right.

They showed up with two minutes to go before fifth period. Lauren gave me a scathing look, completely dressed me down and reminded me just how bad I fucked up. I chose to sit a few rows higher to avoid anyone spotting me from the hallway and wondering what I was doing in here. Lauren clearly didn't have this worry because she sat a few rows in front of me. Being the mediator, Kate sat halfway between the two of us, forcing Lauren to turn and face me when she wanted to speak.

"Okay, so I know this is really awkward and there's a lot of friction between the three of us," Kate began, even though Lauren and I both liked her and had absolutely nothing bad to say about her, "and I wanted to bring us together so we could just talk it out and end this because I'm tired of being angry—"

"Yeah, lemme stop you right there," Lauren said before turning to face me. "What you did was really fucked up and you're lucky I didn't kick the shit out of you."

"Lauren, please, we're—"

"Wait, there's something else I wanted to say," Lauren continued. "Are you really so petty and selfish that you would out me to the entire school and ruin my life just to win a stupid fucking student council election? What kind of sick person does that? What did I ever do to you to deserve that? We never even talked before and you wanted to ruin my life? What did I do to you?! You're a fucking psychopath!"

"I'm sorry," I finally said when she gave me a chance to speak. "You're right. I was mad and I was going to do something horrible because I'm a horrible person. But I promise I don't have the pictures anymore and I would never do something like that again. You are the last person I would ever try to hurt."

"Oh yeah, I totally believe that," she sneered. "Is that what you said before or after you tried the first time around?"

"What can I say to show you that I'd never do that again?" I pleaded. "I promise I will never try to hurt you or Beth again. I swear on my life."

She scoffed. "Like that's worth anything."

Kate's eyes went wide. "Lauren!"

"Oh, come on, do you seriously believe this shit?" she asked. "What kind of person threatens to leak..." She lowered her voice and checked every exit to make sure no one was listening. "Send people a video of me making out with my girlfriend to the entire school for revenge?" She looked back up at me. "I'm not going to let you turn me into Grace fucking Carlisle. I'm not gonna let some snake make me blow my brains out. Cause that's what you are. You're a snake. You kiss people's asses and suck their dicks to get a leg up around here and expect people will like you for it and *then* you use the ego boost and the chance of someone actually giving a shit about you as an excuse to ruin people's lives. After what you did to Kate, I'm shocked she would even consider looking at you again because you would have dragged her down with you. And after she spent so much time actually thinking you were her friend? Fuck you. So unless you're can somehow prove that you've changed and actually care about us, I'm leaving and never speaking to you again because this has been the biggest waste of my fucking time in my entire life." The bell rang and she waited for it to stop before finishing. "I have Student Council now. See ya never."

I don't know why I spoke up. I didn't need to. I guess the part about me being a snake really got to me. Because she was right. I only did what I did to make people like me. It never worked. I always ended up with other peoples' homework to do and everyone forgetting my name by the end of the week. But I did speak up. I needed her to know I was serious.

"I talked to O'Reilly about the assembly."

Lauren stopped halfway to the exit. She stared at me, frowning. "What about it?"

"I told him who did it."

She tried not to reveal how surprised she was. But I saw through it. "Who was it?"

"Harold Dermott."

"Who the fuck is Harold Dermott?"

"He's the guy who confessed to leaking the pictures."

She stared at me for a second, frowning. "Wait... O'Reilly told me somebody named Harold Dermott confessed and I've never heard of this guy before in my life. And if I've never heard of this guy, there's no way Spencer's heard of him either and if Spencer hasn't heard of him, he wasn't getting into that party. How could he have taken the pictures if he wasn't allowed in."

"Spencer didn't know who Kate was until the election," I pointed out. "And he only started caring when he made me spy on her."

"He didn't *make* you do shit," Lauren spat. "You did that yourself. And I don't know who Harold Dermott is, but I know he wasn't at the party. And whatever you told O'Reilly doesn't matter. If this is some scheme to fuck me over or make me like you, just forget about it. Don't talk to me ever again."

She didn't wait for me to try to explain myself again. She probably thought I was trying to screw her over again and this was some elaborate scheme to ruin her life. No good deed goes unpunished, I guess. But in my case, I had a reason to be punished. I deserved to be hated.

Kate and I sat in silence for a moment. "Did he really do it?"

"No," I admitted. "But he took the fall for it. He was leaving school anyway. Figured he'd do a good deed on his way out."

"But why?"

"I don't know."

Kate glanced at the door Lauren left from and sighed. "I have to go, too," Kate said softly. She stood and lingered by the bleachers for a moment. "I'll text you sometime later this week. I'm still willing to give you a second chance. Don't make me look like an asshole for doing it."

She walked away, leaving me cold and alone. And I began to think about how to make things right with Lauren. Actions speak louder than words. Lauren deserved to be happy. I wasn't gunning for her when I took those pictures. She wasn't the bad guy in that relationship. I knew what I had to do. I needed to save her from that little asshole Bethany Hill. No matter what.

## Lauren

Did she really think I was an idiot? Harold Dermott? Who the fuck is Harold Dermott? I don't even know the guy! What was she trying to pull by lying to me? She had to know I wasn't going to buy her bullshit. Why did I let Kate waste my time on someone like that? She had a big heart, but God she was too forgiving for her own good. It's one of the reasons why I could never in my wildest dreams imagine her getting into politics. The world would be better off with someone like her in charge, but fuck if she wouldn't crack under the pressure.

I could never imagine myself actually forgiving Tracy. She didn't deserve my forgiveness. She could rot in Hell for all I cared. I didn't care enough to figure out if she was right or not. It was a lie. I knew it and she did, too. Whether or not Beth was actually behind it was irrelevant, too.

I needed space from Beth. It was the only way I was ever going to get over her. I couldn't get her out of my head, though. It was a cycle of mental abuse I couldn't shake. I hated myself for leaving her. Maybe we could be friends later if it turns out I was wrong for accusing her of being the one who leaked the pictures, but I could never love her again.

Hey, baby.

I've been thinking about you. I hope you've been okay. I'm sorry we couldn't talk as much since I left the hospital. I've been sleeping all the time from the pain meds, but you've been in my dreams every time I shut my eyes. That's so cheesy, I know, but I also know you're the only thing that matters to me anymore.

Ever since Ashley left, I've been so lonely. You're the only thing that has made me want to get out of bed in the morning. You're the only person that understands me, the only one who cares. It's 1 a.m. and I can't sleep 'cause I want you. So fucking badly. I crave your soft, strawberry-flavored lips and the way they taste and feel just makes me go wild. I crave your body. Your absolutely perfect body. When I saw you for the first time, it was like a light going off in my head. That light was the way I really feel about you. I love you. I love you, I love you, I love you. Nothing will tear us apart and all I ask is that you will have me.

I'm falling so hard for you. I have never been more sure of something in my entire life. I'm falling so hard that it actually scares me. Please text me or call me as soon as you can. I need you. I'll be back at school soon, but I want to see you again sometime soon.

Whatever happens, I want us to have a future. I just hope you want the same. You're the greatest thing that ever happened to me. I would do anything for you.

I love you, Lauren.

Spence

## Tracy

There is nothing more irritating than people talking in a library.

I had this massive research paper that I need to so for my AP US History class and I basically spent every study hall I had in the library doing research and generally trying to get away from everyone that could distract me. For my efforts at being a social outcast, I get to listen to two gentle people laughing and talking a few tables over. Of all the days to leave my headphones at home, it had to be that specific day...

Tom and Casey, the two lovebirds, were busy chatting the day away about something involving student council. I could give a shit what they had to say. Something about the movie *Carrie*? I don't know. The only break I got from their incessant blabbering was when they shoved their tongues down each other's throats. Did they even know I was there? Even when I tried to look away and ignore them, they'd moan or grunt or make some other indescribable noise and I'd be forced to look over and find Tom's hand buried under her shirt or her tongue jabbing into his mouth while he made this dopey grin with his eyes closed. Why would anyone choose to do this in the library of all places?

I finally got some peace and quiet when they took off for the hallway. My guess is they were finding someplace a lot more quiet to do a lot more than stealing second base. The thought brought another wave of guilt over the incident with Lauren and Beth. It was one of those dark memories that kept creeping into my mind at the worst times and sent my will to live into the trash heap.

With no desire to keep working on my paper anymore, I sat back and thought of how I could possibly apologize to them. Beth might be some kind of sociopath, but Lauren was good. She could do so much better than the likes of Beth Hill. And then there was Kate, who could and should be friends with anyone at that school. If I could ever convince her to become my friend, I'd do it in a heartbeat.

I heard the door to the private tutoring lounge open up and I thought it was a sign from the universe that I could fix things.

Lauren Bradshaw stepped outside of the room, straightening out her shirt. I was almost to my feet to call her over and give my most heartfelt apology— days before my failed attempt in the gym that ended with me being cussed out and ignored— when I saw someone else leave with her. Spencer hobbled out on his crutches. I was about to ask him to give us a minute when they gave a nervous glance around the room to check if the coast was clear before locking lips and running their hands through each other's hair. Spencer accidentally dropped his backpack and papers and books spilled everywhere. He groaned while she laughed and bent down to clean up after him. When she finished cleaning up, they gave each other the most loving look I have ever seen before creeping off into the main hallway to go do who knows what.

It took me a solid minute before I could really process what I was seeing. My mouth had gone dry from hanging open for so long. The only thought on my mind was wondering if Beth knew her girlfriend was cheating on her.

That was when I saw it. Under a table, there was a collection of three papers stapled together. I found myself wandering over and picking them up. Apparently Spencer had failed his most recent Biology test (he got a 67% which is just barely an F) and that was what led to his private tutoring session with Lauren. As I studied the test, my eyes lingered on the name at the top and the answers below. He had an extremely generic form of handwriting. With no effort at all, someone could just as easily recreate the penmanship.

Some part of me considered what to do next.

One side of my brain said to just throw the test away or say I found it in the library and return it. Nobody would know I was even there or that I had seen anything and I was just being a good person by returning a failing grade to its owner. Maybe even offer to tutor him myself and laugh about the bad grade. “Everyone gets them once and awhile,” I would assure him. And then we would work on it and maybe raise him up to a C+ after dealing with his lack of study habits. He’d be grateful and I can say I did a good deed. Maybe Lauren would give me a second chance for that.

The other side of my brain said that Beth deserved to know and that there was only one way to get her attention and get her off my back once and for all. Lauren might be a good person, but Spencer put me up to the scheme with Kate. He was the one who deserved the scorn and the retribution. Him and Beth. And the only way to ever get back in good with the likes of Kate and Lauren was to expose him as a homewrecker who ruined their relationship.

A piece of notebook paper was neatly ripped from the steel binding and my pen was moving before I knew it.

My romantic history was pretty limited to say the least. He never exactly wrote love letters or sent bouquets of flowers and boxes of chocolates. We spent most of our time getting into each other’s pants. It’s a miracle I never got pregnant. When we weren’t having sex, we were making money. Really good money. Even though I had no idea how to write a traditional “love letter” in Spencer’s personal style, I’d forged enough notes and absence excuses to have an idea of how to not be found out so easily. It wasn’t the language she would care about. It was the name at the bottom of the page.

I wanted to send it. I really did. I wanted to send it to both of them and break them up and ruin their lives for ruining mine. Even though it was all my fault, I still wanted to blame them. Lauren wasn’t a bad person. She just had terrible taste in girls. And Spencer was kind of an asshole so guys, too, I guess. All it would take is one little letter to break them up for good.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t bring myself to send the love letter. I was still convinced I could win them back by showing I wanted to be their friend. Lauren and Kate were worth being a good person for. I was too proud to admit I needed people, but I do. It gets lonely being an army of one sometimes.

And there I was just a few short days later, sitting alone in the gym with the note that had been collecting dust in my backpack. I wasn’t lying when I said I would do anything to be their friend. Lauren challenged me to prove how much I actually cared about being good. This was the answer to that challenge. This little note could fix everything and show Beth what you get for being a coldhearted bitch.

Lauren may not see it, but I’m doing her a favor. By getting Beth out of her life, I’m giving her a chance to actually *live*. Beth Hill is a weed. No, that’s an insult to weeds. She’s a cancer. A cancer that sucks all of the life out of you for its own gain until you are scared and sick and broken. By ripping this bandage off of her, I’m doing her a bigger favor than gifts or food could ever do. She may not see it that way, but she would come to understand in time. I knew she would. She had to.

So I gently folded the paper over and wrote **LAUREN** in big letters with a small heart beside it. On the back, in my own handwriting, I wrote a small message for the real recipient. Beth would find it eventually and I would be in the clear.

Upon checking the clock, I saw I had exactly five minutes to get this note into her locker before fifth period let out and I was at risk of being caught. I left all of my stuff in the gym and hurried off to make the drop-off. Even though her locker was locked, the locker doors had small slanted vents on the top. The note slid perfectly through the gap. The bell rang a few seconds later. Even though I had to hurry

to collect my things from back in the gym to avoid missing my bus and being stranded at the place I hated almost as much as my own home, it was worth it to know justice would be served.

Now all I had to do was sit back and for her to read it.

## Vinny

The note that just happened to land at my feet between fourth and fifth period as I returned my books after Spanish class. Ms. Cherry is notorious for timing people's bathroom breaks to keep people from wandering off, even if this was a meeting with O'Reilly, so I was on a bit of a time limit. This same time limit went double for the girls because, and I quote her own words, "Just because God gave you womanly problems doesn't mean you can skip my class." Victoria actually got a detention for that one time. Talk about a Grade-A bitch.

I'm not an idiot. Even though the note was signed off from O'Reilly, he wouldn't slide a note into someone's locker like somebody's secret admirer. He would call for you over the loudspeaker. Whoever wanted to see me couldn't be stupid enough to think I would fall for that. Still, though, I could just claim to be late to fifth period by saying I had a note from O'Reilly. If she tried to check, she really was the biggest asshole in the whole school.

I gave a quick glance up and down the hall to be sure I wasn't being watched before wandering inside the classroom I was asked to meet in. The lights were turned off, but I could see someone standing in the middle of the changing area at the far side of the room. It kinda creeped me out that she was standing in the darkness, but I sacked up and went in to say hi.

"Gee, Mr. O'Reilly, you sure shrunk, huh?" I asked with a grin she could not see. "Did somebody keep you in the dryer for too long?"

"Coming from a guy who's freakishly tall, I don't take as much offense to that as I probably should."

A light flicked on. She shined the flashlight from her phone onto me and I was momentarily blinded. "You mind telling me what you wanna talk about?" I asked as I covered my hands with my hand.

She lowered the light, her expression as innocent as a bunny. "I just wanted to have some alone time with you," she said sweetly.

"Have we ever even spoken to each other before?" I can smell bullshit a mile away, but I decided to play along and see where this was going. She did have an amazing ass. "If you wanted to be alone with me so bad, all you had to do was ask. I'm told I'm a very... accommodating gentleman."

"Is that the line you used to get Victoria to go out with you?"

I smirked. "Something like that. I think she was more interested in me because of my conversational skills than my looks. She told me that I am an amazing listener."

"I'm sure you are," she said. "Which is why I'd like it if you'd *accommodate* my asking you a favor in exchange for *listening* to some information you might want to hear."

"I'm *listening*."

"I wasn't at the meeting with you and the football team so I don't know the specifics of what you guys agreed to do in terms of a ceasefire—"

"There won't be any trouble from my guys," I promised once again for what felt like the hundredth time. "We worked everything out and we're gonna be okay as long as the football guys don't start anything. Spencer said we were cool and I believe him."

"Yeah, he's pretty chill, isn't he?" she asked while taking a few steps towards me. "Be that as it may, I want you to be absolutely clear where I stand in all of this. Lauren is my best friend. I love her to death and would do anything to help her out. She doesn't want her first school dance as President to go down like Prom did last year. We still have a half-dozen dances after this and having an awful



Homecoming will make things look bad for her going forward. You see what I'm getting at here? I don't want her first real school event to go up in smoke."

"Well," I said, "technically this is her *second* school event. Remember the mental health seminar? And Brad?"

"Fair enough. I wasn't there for that one either. But you know what I mean."

I cocked my head to the side. "You sure you're the Vice President? Aren't they supposed to be at all of these things?" I spoke up before she could think of a comeback. "Hey, chill, just a little joke. I can *promise* you that we didn't have anything in mind for the dance or for the Anniversary or anything else. The guys may hate me for it, and honestly I do love knocking Spencer down a peg every once and awhile, but I will have absolutely no part in whatever is going on."

"What about before the dance? Or during the football game? Maybe the after party?"

Beth Hill was only about five-two, but she acted like she's a superheavyweight that stands over seven feet tall. She had absolutely no fear and commanded every conversation you had with her. I guess some people might find it kinda hot in a "punish me mommy" kinda way, but I find it extremely exhausting because she's constantly talking down at you and never has anything positive to say ever. It's all just business and official shit nobody cares about.

"There's nothing going on," I swore. "Don't you trust me?"

"I never said I didn't," she replied. "Tell you the truth, I was going to offer you a spot on Student Council if everything goes well. A little boost to the college applications. You wouldn't need to actually do anything if you don't want to, though."

"I thought all the spots were filled?"

"It's a new spot I planned to create special for you as a sign of good faith. How would you like to be the official Arlington City High Student-Faculty Liaison?"

I laughed. "Get the fuck out of here. What would I do? Kiss O'Reilly's ass?"

"No more than you already do!" she happily said. "Remember when most of the team showed up drunk after the one playoff game last year and you had to talk him out of suspending them?" Not our finest moment. I wanted to strangle those idiots for nearly costing us the season. "So do I have your word that nothing is going to happen? All this and more could be yours if I hear a simple yes! Consent is pretty sexy." She made sure to bite her lip and bat her eyelashes a couple times. Unfortunately for her, I'm not cheating on Victoria.

"Are you really that paranoid over a silly little prank?" I said, grinning even wider.

She shook her head and reached over for a gym bag tucked under the bench a thousand asses had sweat on over the years. "No. I'm more paranoid over *this* getting into the wrong hands. *Spencer* isn't as worried, though." She carefully slid the ziplock bag across the table and beckoned me to open it. I decided to humor her and see what was going on.

It took me a second to make sense of all the pictures. When I realized what this was, I was in total panic mode.

## Beth

Convincing Vinny to not act out was the easy part. I had more than enough leverage to scare him and all those other losers into submission and if they actually did try anything, I knew exactly how to bury them. I had more than enough experience in this particular form of revenge. And the best part is I had all of the leverage I needed in the event plans change and I needed them.

Vinny trusted me more than I could have ever dreamed of. God, he was so pissed when I brought out the gym bag. It was delicious. Threaten a jock with losing their college scholarship or academic eligibility and you make them yours. Even the most pathetic burnouts on the team who would never even make it into community college were smart enough to know that scoring a layup is their only hope of actually making money one day and not spending the rest of their life flipping burgers for minimum wage. Vinny seemed like he was going places, but the rest of those losers can barely spell their own names without getting a headache. It's why they needed someone to print it on their uniforms for them.

I'll never forget exactly what was running through my head the second the little piece of paper fell out of my locker. I didn't recognize it so I figured it was just some scrap I'd forgotten to throw away. But curiosity got the better of me and I decided to give it a once-over.

*What's this? A note from Lauren?*

*Motherfucker.*

*Motherfucker.*

*I know it was her. That disgusting little bitch. I did nothing but be nice to her and this is how she repays me? I talked her into not blowing her fucking brains out and she tries to fuck with me like this? AGAIN?! I swear to God, I'll gut that little whore and mount her head on the fucking flagpole. She better be in the Student Council office. I wanna make this fast so nobody sees me carving her eyes out with a letter opener.*

*That little cunt is gonna die.*

## Ashley

Here I was just trying to enjoy my day by reading a book that talks about how Virginia Woolf and a bunch of her rich buddies did blackface to pose as Ethiopian royalty so they could score a private tour of the *HMS Dreadnought* in the middle of an arms race with Germany and before I know it, the door slams into the wall with no warning and with so much force that I almost bit my tongue and cut it in half. My eyes darted up from the little book and I saw Beth with eyes fixed on me. I thought she was going to decapitate me or something.

I took a deep breath to steady myself and frowned at her. “Hello to you, too?”

“What the hell is this?”

“What is what?”

“*This!*” She crushed up a piece of paper into a ball and threw it at me. It landed harmlessly on the desk in front of me. Naturally, I raced to open it and see what this was about. She was kinda freaking me out. Just a little. “Mind telling me why you made this bullshit up?”

I barely got a sentence in and she was already on the verge of stabbing me or something. She was standing over me literally shaking with rage. “Made what up? What are you *talking* about?”

“You know what it says,” she growled.

“Jesus Christ, what’s your damage, Beth?”

“My *damage* is you made up some stupid lie to piss me off and make Lauren hate me so you can get back with her. Well guess what, you dumb bitch, it won’t work. After all the shit I did for you? After I talked you off the fucking ledge? And this is how you repay me? Fuck you!”

I thought I was having a stroke and this was my vision as I faded to black. I seriously had no idea what the fuck was going on. The note was pretty easy to read, though I had to keep rereading it because my brain couldn’t focus on what was going on. Chalk that one up to the girl getting ready to take a swing at me as soon as I looked up at her.

“Just because we broke up doesn’t mean we won’t get back together,” she went on, very matter-of-factly. I guess she thought that her saying this would hurt me. “For your information, we were planning on coming out to our parents. We’re going to be the power couple at this school whether you like it or not.”

I had to look at the handwriting a second time. Something seemed off about it.

“After everything you did to me last year, and I still gave you a chance? I still tried to be your friend. I tried to put what happened to Grace out of my head for Lauren’s sake. She swore you were different now. That you changed. But you didn’t change. You’re just the same breed of cunt you were last year. So fuck you for ever letting me think you were different and fuck me for ever trying to be your friend.”

She was tearing up now. Her words stung. Like a hundred yellowjackets going for my eyeballs. I went every day for months blaming myself for Grace’s suicide. I will never not blame myself for that, even if Kara was the one who terrorized her the most. I could never give a good enough apology. To Beth or Grace’s parents or anybody.

I was too focused on the note to respond to her. It was hard to explain. It wasn’t just the wording, but there was something weird. I’d gone over a hundred of his papers and old tests when we dated to try and help him get a passing grade so I knew his handwriting inside and out. On the rare occasion that he actually did write me a note like this—which meant dirty texts I only feigned interest in receiving and

had to imagine they were from Lauren whenever they appeared in my inbox— he did not talk like this. It was too... romantic. Too cheesy, as the note itself said.

“Nothing to say?”

“Just one.” I squinted and gave it another once-over. “I didn’t write this.” I set the note down in front of me and stared at her, not wanting to lose my temper but also not willing to let her just get away with cussing me out like that. “So why don’t you chill out and talk about this instead of going crazy over nothing.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m over that whole you and Lauren thing,” I said, only partially lying. I’d never be over her for as long as I lived. Not really. “I’m over her and I wish you well with this whole coming out plan. You’re a stronger person than I am for wanting to go through with it. And I really hope things work out with you guys and you get back together. But you’re also dumb as shit if you think I wrote that.”

I made sure to leave out the part that Lauren and Spencer were fucking now, but I’d let her figure that out on her own. It wasn’t my place to say that and ruin her day.

She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. “I don’t believe you.”

“You want proof?” I took out my phone and held it up for her to see. “Do you want to see some of Spencer’s *sexy texts* he sent me when we dated? I think I still have some saved on my phone. I almost sent screenshots to my friends to laugh about because of how horribly unsexy they were.” Was that cruel to think about doing? Yeah, probably. But damn, if it wasn’t funny.

She didn’t even think about looking. “So?”

I opened up the note and laughed as I read what I consider my favorite line from that little love letter. I lowered my voice to do my best Spencer impression. “*‘Your soft, strawberry-flavored lips and the way they taste and feel and make me go wild?’*” The impression needed some work. “That’s bad fan fiction writing, *at best*, but still leagues above the shit Spencer thinks up to try and turn a girl on. Like I said, I have screenshots and you’re more than welcome to see them. I deleted the pictures that came with them, though, so don’t get your hopes up.”

Beth took a small step backwards, her confidence crashing like the Hindenburg.

“I think somebody’s fucking with you,” I said with brutal honesty. “But that’s just me. Since I’m trying to be a better person and actually help people who have been my friend in the past, I will accept your unspoken apology and we can pretend this never happened because, let’s face it, I would do the same if I were in your shoes and someone wanted to come between me and the girl I loved.”

Beth reached out and took the note. She read it over. I think she was just trying to avoid looking at me.

“Do you want some help finding out who wrote that?”

She sniffed and buried the note in her jeans. She was wearing long sleeves again. It hurt to see that. She tended to do that in the days after I was especially cruel to her last year. “That won’t be necessary,” she said quietly. “Thank you.” She hurried for the door and shut it quietly behind her. She never even looked up at me again.

The second the latch clicked, I dialed Lauren’s number. It rang for about two seconds before she picked up. “Emergency. Come to the Student Council Office. Like, now.”

## Beth

The water from the sink was cold. It made me shiver. I felt it trickle down my wrists and soak into the bandages as I washed my face over and over and over again. I had to keep splashing myself with it. That way I couldn't tell if I was crying or if it was just water pouring down my cheeks.

I am such a goddamn idiot. I should have known she wouldn't do that, not after all we've done for her. Stupid stupid idiot piece of shit moron. How the fuck could I let myself lose my temper like that? It was the most obvious scam ever. A forged love note meant for someone else just magically found its way inside of your locker? Child's play.

This is why you should always think before you act. Because if you don't, you look like a massive idiot and embarrass yourself. Now Ashley was all but guaranteed to snitch on me to Lauren and Lauren will think I'm losing my fucking mind and not want anything to do with me ever again and I'll be back at square one.

*You goddamn stupid idiot bitch. Why would you do that? STUPID!*

I punched the paper towel dispenser. It crunched beneath my hand and the hinges that held the shell onto the back piece snapped. The plastic crashed to the ground and the echo rang in my ears. I left it there to collect dust.

There were footsteps outside the bathroom. I tensed up, preparing excuses in my head to explain why I was taking a sink shower and there was a broken paper towel dispenser at my feet. But no one entered. I heard the footsteps scurry away. If I didn't happen to glance over when I heard them leave, I'd have never seen the little note that was shoved between the crack in the door.

*Now do I have your attention?*

*Meet me in the girls' locker room while the Volleyball Team is practicing.*

*A Friend*

I guess Lauren wasn't the only one with a secret admirer. My head raced as I considered who could have done this to me. Vinny for blackmailing him? Brad for disposing of him? Frank for helping organize the peace treaty? Kate for all but throwing her aside when she became useless? Victoria for me trying to screw her friend out of becoming Treasurer?

One thing was for sure, though: Spencer was clearly making a move on Lauren. Soon. Anyone who would use this threat of them getting together clearly knew something I did not. My biggest fear was that Lauren would throw spending the rest of our lives together to get dick from the crippled son of an alcoholic millionaire. I was worth a thousand Spencers. What could he possibly have that I didn't? I fucking loved that girl. I'd have died for her. Spencer can't beat that. I would have to keep an even closer eye on him going forward. If that was even possible at this point.

There was no way I could bring myself to go to Student Council. Instead, I'd lock myself inside the bathroom and wait until it was time for volleyball practice. Lauren would be occupied and I could learn the identity of my arch enemy. I suddenly could not wait for four o'clock. I just wish I had a carving knife so I could make a coat out of this bastard's skin.

## Vinny

The guys came running as soon as I sent the message in the group chat. This wasn't something that needed to get around to the rest of the team. Only the people who needed to know had to worry. They made it into the gym right as fifth period started.

"So what's going on?" Alex asked.

I didn't answer. I just slid the plastic bag across the floor and let them see for themselves. Lonnie reached for the bag and opened it while Alex and DeSean watched. Their eyes lit up like Christmas trees. I had the same reaction when Beth showed me the pictures before. A dozen different pictures of his little attempt at blackmail.

"Holy shit," was all Alex could say as tore through the pics.

"What is this?" DeSean asked.

"It looks somebody raided a gym," Lonnie said.

"Not a gym. A locker room. It's *our* locker room," I said. They looked up at me, confused. "At least that's what that crippled prick wants O'Reilly to believe if we try anything on Saturday." I instantly regretted saying it and looked at DeSean. "Fuck, sorry, man, I didn't—"

DeSean didn't care and waved me off. "Who gave this to you?"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "And there's more. *A lot* more. And if we try anything with the football team, Spencer is taking it straight to O'Reilly. If you think what happened to Charles was bad, get fucking ready because we'll *all* be going down."

Lonnie found the copy of the prescription inside and read it over. "It says it belongs to you." He glanced up at me with wide eyes. I wasn't sure if he understood that it was a forgery and thought I actually got a prescription for HGH before I turned eighteen.

"There's more," I said, saving him the trouble of reading the rest. "One for you, one for Alex. Christ, there's one for half the fuckin' team."

"But none of us..." Lonnie looked around at the other guys for some sign that we were clean. "Nobody here uses this shit, right?"

I can't speak for the rest of the guys. I'd never touch that shit. Alex, though, I don't know. He really needed a scholarship. And the rest of the team probably had at least one or two guys who would do it if it means they get a chance at playing in college.

"Fuck it, it doesn't matter now," I said, saving the others from possibly admitting wrongdoing. "O'Reilly gets a hold of that stuff and anyone with those notes gets suspended for the year. That means no college, no NBA, no nothing."

Lonnie began shoving the pictures back in the bag, hoping it would save us from being caught. "So what do we do?" Alex asked. I didn't have an answer.

"How'd you get this anyway?" DeSean asked.

"Someone snitched on him," I answered. "Found it over at Spencer's house and we should know. And they said there's more where this came from in case we don't keep our heads down on Saturday." The anger I felt when Beth handed me the bag came roaring back inside of me. I reached down and grabbed a basketball that was just laying around and hurled it as hard as I could at the wall. "Smug rich bastard FUCK!"

"Hey, hey, hey, relax," DeSean said. "Don't hurt yourself over some douchebag pretty boy. He's not worth it."

"Alright... Alright. I'm calm." I was absolutely not calm, but this was the best thing I could say. My blood was boiling.

"What do we do now?" Lonnie asked.

"We have to do what he says," Alex said. "Keep our heads down and do nothing."

"That's *bullshit*, though!" Lonnie yelled. "We went through that whole meeting thing and they still need to *threaten us*? What the fuck is wrong with them?!"

"You're right," I said. "But it's not worth losing the season over. We do anything, he frames us and we each get expelled. Even if this is a bluff, O'Reilly still threatened to end the season anyway. We're fucked no matter what so we might as well do nothing."

I hated saying it, but it was true. There was nothing we could do. We were trapped. All we could do was go to the dance with our cheerleader dates and act like nothing was wrong. Victoria and I would get to slow dance while Spencer sat in his wheelchair and stared at me with that douchey little smile and I had to bend over and take it like a bitch. Fuck that guy and his whole family. This wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

## Ashley

“Do you know who sent it?” Lauren asked.

I shrugged. “No idea. But she is *livid* right now. Like on the verge of putting her hand through a window angry. It was kinda scary.”

Lauren buried her face in her hands. “Oh, God...”

I gave her shoulder a gentle massage, my thumb rubbing over her shoulder blade. “Hey, it’ll be okay. Don’t worry about her. And don’t worry about this stupid note.”

“Why can’t I just be happy?” she whispered as she began to cry.

“How about you let me take care of the note?” I asked. “You focus on you for now. You need a break, Lauren.”

“A break from what?” she asked.

There was nothing I could do to make her happy. Nothing would make it better. She needed a break. From school, from Homecoming, from volleyball, from Student Council, from guys, from girls. From everything. She was stretching herself too thin. I wondered if she even had time to process the fact that she and Beth were broken up. Beth sure as shit didn’t.

“Everything.”



## Beth

It's kind of ironic in a funny way. I left a little love letter to Vinny to get him alone long enough to blackmail him and here I was going right back to learn the identity of my own stalker who enjoyed leaving little notes, too. Should I have brought a box cutter for self defense? Perhaps. Far too messy, though.

I saw her standing in the divide between the changing room and the bathroom. She was as poised as ever. I almost admired her willingness to go to a meeting like this without any protection or backup or anything. She had to have known how angry this would make me. It almost made me admire her commitment to ruining my life. Almost.

"Well, I suppose I should have assumed that you were the one who sent that from the start," I said. I really was a moron for thinking fucking Brad would try to get revenge like this. *Unless she was secretly sleeping with Brad and is in cahoots with him? Possibilities...* "But then again, I thought you said you never wanted to speak to me again."

"Things changed," Tracy said. "Flipping out on Ashley like that was a bit too far."

"You're the one writing lies to try and break me and Lauren up," I reminded her. "Pot calling the kettle black, from where I'm standing."

"Lies? Really?"

"I know your type," I said with a sneer. "You're a bitter, poor, self-obsessed loser who can't accept her lot in life. And no matter how many times people like me are forced to put you in your place, you keep crawling back up and annoying me. You're a cockroach."

"You know, two months ago that would have really hurt me," Tracy said coolly. "But now I can tell that's nothing compared to some of the stuff you probably say on a daily basis. You're the real cockroach. You don't know when to quit."

I shrugged. "I'm honest with people. You're a liar. Major difference."

"Am I?"

"After what happened with Kate? Don't act like a saint." She glared at me. "Lauren and I are going to be fine. She knows I'm the best thing that ever happened to her."

"You really believe that. Don't you?" I only glared at her. "Whatever you may think about me, I'm not lying to you."

"Do you have proof?" I asked with a smirk. "A picture? You *are* the photographer around here. Did they invite you to live with them and have a threesome in the back of that wreck of a truck he used to drive around in?"

She shook her head. "Nope. But I saw them."

"Where?"

"The library. They were in the tutoring room together."

I gasped and pressed a hand to my heart. "Spencer needing tutoring from a girl with a 4.3 GPA because he missed weeks of classes due to his injury? I can't believe it!"

"It's true. They left when they thought they were alone and started making out. Just right there in the middle of the room."

"So you expect me to believe you just happened to be sitting in the library at the exact same moment they were making out in broad daylight where anybody could see them? You expect me to believe the *one time* you could have taken pictures of two people making out, you don't do it?" I could

not stop myself before I laughed in her face. “Holy shit, you really are stupid, aren’t you? Probably from inhaling the fumes from that loser boyfriend of yours.”

She brushed off the comment about Damien and repeated herself. “I’m not lying to you.”

“I’m sure you aren’t,” I said. I held up the note for her to see. “Would you explain this for me?”

“I needed to get your attention.”

“By forging a love letter.” I scoffed. “Real mature. What is this? Middle school?”

“It worked didn’t it?” I did not dignify that with a response. “Tell me something... where were you when the assembly was going on?” When I gave no answer, she went on. “Because everybody was up there except for you. And given you’re the Vice President, you’re normally expected to be at those. Right?”

“I had a dentist appointment I didn’t know about and my mom came to pick me up early.”

“Bullshit.”

“And the liar calls me a liar. Prove I’m lying and I’ll admit it. But you can’t and I’m not.”

“No thanks,” she said. “I don’t want to stroke your already inflamed ego, but you’re the only one who could pull that off.”

I frowned. “Pull what off?”

“Sending a mass group text to the entire school and all of our parents. That doesn’t happen outside of movies. You’d need a lot of phones and phone numbers.”

“Yes, I suppose it is rather hard to send that many texts. Whoever did that must be a real genius for being able to pull that off.”

The look on her face was priceless. Pure scorn from someone who had no room to judge anyone. “God... you really have no shame. Do you?”

I smiled and twiddled my thumbs. “What do you mean?”

“Believe it or not, I’m here to offer you a deal.”

“Oh, this should be good.”

“I’m not lying about Lauren. She cheated on you with Spencer and you and I both know she will never admit it to your face. If you’re even still together, anyway. The way she was hanging onto him, I wouldn’t be shocked if she dumped your ass weeks ago.”

It took everything in me not to drown her in the toilet for even suggesting that. *We’re gonna be fine.* “What deal did you have in mind exactly?”

“If she ever comes clean or you realize I’m telling the truth, I want my spot on Student Council back,” she stated bluntly.

I smiled sweetly at her. “Tracy, I don’t know if you understand how democracy works, but you lost. You can’t just weasel your way back in so easily.”

“Quit wasting my fucking time,” she muttered. “Half the people in that room got jobs handed to them because they’re Lauren’s friends. Same thing happened with Charles. And I need my college applications to look as amazing as possible so you give me this and I back off.”

“Spencer needs everything he can get now, too,” I said. “Especially if he’s stuck getting tutoring sessions. The difference between you two is he doesn’t grovel at my feet for his old job back. That actually almost makes me respect him.”

“Spencer is gonna get back on that football team by the end of the semester. He’s going to be fine. We all know colleges are creaming themselves at the thought of recruiting him. And I’m not a quarterback. I’m going to be going to Stanford or Yale or maybe even Harvard. I’m going to make something of myself.”

“How inspiring.”

“Why can’t you see that I’m actually trying to help you here? Whether you believe it or not, I am. Regardless of whether you believe me or not, you’re going to get hurt eventually.”

“I’m sure the thought of that just turns you on so fucking much.” She ignored me. I gave her proposal a second thought and finally said, “You know what? Deal.” She actually looked a little surprised that I caved so easily. “I’ll even go a step further. Just show up to the meeting on Thursday. Don’t let anyone know you’re coming beforehand, just show up. I’ll take the heat for you. We’re discussing more ways to bring the basketball and football teams together.”

She eyed me suspiciously before nodding and saying, “I’m in.”

I took a step closer and pointed at her, trying to act as menacing as possible despite her being taller. “But let me be very clear here for a second. *Everyone* still hates you for what you did. Lauren, Kate, me, *everyone*. *You* need to make things right with *them*. *I* can take the heat for letting you back in the room, but *you* need to justify why you deserve to be there.”

She stared me down. “Got it.”

“Now, if you will excuse me, I have to do some thinking about how hard I’m going to rub it in when Lauren tells me just how wrong you are.”

I turned and left, the door clunking shut behind me. I did have a lot of thinking to do. Things were moving too fast. I needed to slow things down and refocus on what was most important. Lauren needed my help. That was how I would win her back.

## Kate

The week seemed to fly by after our meeting. Before any of us knew it, it was Thursday and the only thing anyone could talk about was the football game and the dance and where they were getting their hair done. It was kind of exhausting, really.

The final bell finally rang and we all gathered in the Student Council room for the last meeting before the Homecoming the next day. We were greeted by the two new smiling faces sitting on the far side of the room. Okay, scratch that: Vinny was the one who wore a warm smile. Tracy looked like she was going to puke. She made sure to avert her eyes when I looked at her.

Apparently Beth had gone out of her way to invite them to fill some empty spots we had. Spots I didn't even know existed. What made it a real shock was she didn't tell anyone that she was planning on doing that, Lauren included.

"I tried to call you, but you never picked up," Beth quietly said when Lauren took her aside to ask why she didn't say anything earlier. "Sorry." Lauren didn't respond and that was the end of that.

The rest of the meeting was going over plans for Homecoming and reminding everyone that they *needed* to be there as a condition of their being on Student Council. It was probably the stupidest rule I've ever heard in my life. Why do you *need* to go to Homecoming and Snow Ball and Prom if you're on the Student Council?

Mr. Hardy answered that question for me a second after people complained. He said it was because we needed to represent the school and keep an eye on our classmates and be leaders, but considering half the people in the room would be hammered before they even walked into the gym, there was no saving them from themselves. All I could hope was they stayed coherent enough to give consent and use protection when they snuck out the back door to go hook up somewhere. And, you know, not crash their cars on the ride home.

I could tell there was some friction between Lauren and Beth and wanted to help. Hopefully not as poorly as before. Was it my place? No, but she was my friend. That's what friends do. She could hate me for prying later.

"Look, Kate, I'm really glad you want to help," Lauren said, "but we just need some time apart right now. Things are... complicated."

"Hey, I get it," I said. I very much did not get it. "But if you need to talk to someone..."

Lauren smiled. "You're sweet. But I'll be fine. Especially after this weekend."

Once again proving to be the most useless one out of anyone in the room, I excused myself and said I'd see her later. I didn't know what she meant about the weekend. I was probably overthinking things, but it seemed like she had been cutting me out lately. Is it bad that I was actually missing Tracy? At least she pretended to be my friend...

## Ashley

"Okay so we all know why we're here," I said. "We gotta figure this shit out between you two and today was not helping at all. We're supposed to be working together and running this place. Being petty isn't going to fix things and I know I fucked up the last time I brought you two together, but this is really important so can we just talk? Please?"

Kara would be proud of my attempt to lead this place. She'd be smiling if she was there. She always believed in leading with an iron fist. If it took an iron fist to bring these two back together so Homecoming wasn't a complete disaster then so be it.

Lauren frowned. "I'm not being petty."

Beth didn't even look at her. "I was just trying to help the group and keep the peace."

"I did that at the meeting," Lauren said. "I made sure Vinny would keep everyone happy and that was it. We didn't need him here in some made-up job that doesn't even make any sense! *I* have to talk to Hardy and O'Reilly about everything that goes on here because *I'm* the President. What is *he* going to do?"

"He doesn't trust us," Beth said. "If he's here, he can see that we aren't going to stab him in the back. And O'Reilly has a soft spot for star athletes—"

"I'm Captain of the Volleyball Team!"

"But we both know that he only cares about football and basketball," she said. "I'd have asked Spencer, but we both also know they don't exactly see eye to eye right now. Vinny might be able to get through to him if we can't."

"I feel like you're overthinking this a little," I offered.

"Better safe than sorry."

"Fine, whatever, I can understand Vinny," Lauren huffed. "But *Tracy*? After what she did to us and Kate?"

"What'd she do?" I asked.

"She lied to Kate and pretended to be her friend to ruin her campaign," Beth said before Lauren could answer. "Kate took it pretty hard. For obvious reasons."

I still regret ever letting them put her up to that. Kate didn't deserve to have that happen to her. I made a mental note to reach out to her and see how she was doing. She seemed like she had been lonely lately. I'd been so worried about the dance and caught up in my own shit that I kinda neglected her over the past few weeks.

"Yeah, that's fair," I said after they rubbed salt in a wound I inflicted on myself.

"But *why* would you bring her back?" Lauren asked, her frustration leaking through the cracks in the wall she was trying to put up to seem like she was indifferent to this conversation.

"Kate and Tracy made amends. Now I'm trying to show that we're willing to forgive and forget."

"Fuck that," Lauren spat. "She's a snake. I don't want her anywhere near this room while I'm here. The fact that she even came here at all today is insane."

I held up my hands. "Guys, come on, let's calm down a little." Lauren huffed and Beth stared down at the desk. This was going nowhere fast so I decided to try and play at their love for each other to try and find a compromise here. "Hey, come on, you guys were basically inseparable a couple weeks ago. What happened?"

Neither of them answered the question and both of them looked hurt that it was brought up at all. I really shit the bed on trying to mend fences.

## Lauren

Moments like this convinced me that I made the right choice in breaking up with her.

She tries so hard to come off as this total control freak who was “just doing what’s best for me,” which was actually something she said when she first tried to convince me to run for President, and it only makes me regret ever wanting to be her girlfriend in the first place.

Maybe even regret being her friend...

As much of an asshole as that might make me, it’s one of those dirty thoughts I heard in the back of my head every now and then. And days like this turn that voice into a scream.

It’s not fair that she can just run around making decisions for me. She knew how much I hated Tracy and Vinny can be a real asshole. Even if he’s helping us right now, who knows when he’s going to try and get back at Spencer for something he had absolutely nothing to do with. Maybe Beth’s right and having him around might at least convince him that we want to extend an olive branch and mend fences or whatever. The truth is I didn’t really want him anywhere near us.

Am I an asshole for thinking this? Maybe.

Homecoming was less than two days away and I still had to get my nails done.

## Kate

As I gathered my things while I waited for the bus to show up, Tracy walked up to me. I held my breath, grit my teeth, and got ready to deal with it.

"I know things are still weird between us," she said without any pleasantries, "and I think I know a way to prove I care about making things right."

Next thing I knew, we were in her car. The windows were down and I admired the houses as she drove down the suburban streets and into a very rich neighborhood. I'm talking gated community quality houses. I'm shocked we weren't intercepted by secret agents who could smell the poverty on our breaths.

The radio was playing Top 40 music and we sat in relative silence. I really had nothing to say and my anxiety about being around Tracy again kept me sitting straight up in the seat. We'd make awkward eye contact in the rear view mirror and then quickly look away. It was a very dull car ride, all things considered.

We pulled up in front of a familiar house and Tracy stopped a few houses down. "Why are we at Spencer's house?"

"They should be home in the next few minutes," Tracy said, checking her phone. "My... um... my friend said they left school a little late."

"Who is *they*?"

She didn't answer and we waited in silence. It took only about five minutes before a car pulled down the street and turned into Spencer's driveway. Tracy carefully turned the engine back on and used an empty driveway to make a turn that put us back in front of Spencer's place. She motioned toward the front door and I saw Lauren helping Spencer into his house. They were smiling and laughing.

And then they kissed.

And my heart sank.

"I know this is really hard to watch," Tracy said, "but Lauren is cheating on Beth with Spencer."

"Yeah. I can see that." The pit in my stomach opened up and I lost my nonexistent chance at getting with a guy who would never settle for the likes of me. "How did you know?" I asked. "About them, I mean."

"I saw him lean into her car after school a couple days ago when everyone else had gone home. I think he stuck around so she could do some tutoring or something."

"Oh."

"I know you liked him," she said softly. "I'm sorry."

"Who cares anymore. He's taken now, right?"

"I hope you know I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"No," I said, trying and failing to seem disinterested. "It's fine. I needed to see this."

"For what it's worth," Tracy said, "Spencer is just a horndog who only cares about what's between a girl's legs. Not what's between her ears or in her heart."

"What Hallmark movie did you get that one from?"

"The good one. The *honest* one. We'll find you someone at the dance. Don't you worry."

"That'd be nice," I admitted.

"And even if you don't have a date to this dance, there's plenty of dances coming up that you can get a date for! Snow Ball, Sadie Hawkins, *Prom*." She gave me a gentle punch to the shoulder. "You'll find someone. I promise."

I smiled. "Thank you."

As much as I wanted to hate her forever, it was nice to have someone to talk to again. She and I got so close in the two weeks we were friends. It might have all been a lie, but it was a good lie. Two weeks of actually feeling like somebody cared. I knew I could never fully forgive her for what she did, but I also knew that people could change and it was better to have someone in my life than no one.

Is that as pathetic as it sounds?



## Vinny

After I got those pictures from Beth, I'd been dealing with some of the worst anxiety of my life. I think I slept seven hours in three days. I'd been dealing with insomnia since the whole Victoria incident happened but it was never as bad as it got during the leadup to the dance. I probably needed to see a therapist or something.

Victoria was nothing but supportive, though. She doesn't sleep much either so she was almost always available to talk. Even at three in the morning, she'd picked up the phone and listened to me talk about whatever's bothering me. I don't know what I did to deserve her. Is it weird that I was considering proposing before either of us even make it to college?

That being said, she had absolutely no idea what's bothering me. She could never find out about the pics or who gave them to me. None of the guys could know either. All they needed to know was Spencer was trying to fuck with us to keep us quiet. And as much as it sucked, it was working. I'm wasn't ruining everyone's chances of getting into college, especially mine, because of that little prick.

Victoria asked me for a ride to school on Friday, the morning of the Homecoming game. It was a pretty quiet ride, all things considered. I think she knew I was struggling again that day, but didn't want to press it unless I started the conversation.

When we started walking toward the school, I shivered. It'd been getting colder and colder as the days went by even though it was only the middle of October. I hated the cold.

Victoria, meanwhile, was loving it. "Can fall please never end?"

"I'm more of a spring gal, myself," I said with a half-smile.

"I love that, too," she said. "But what separates those two? *Winter*. I *hate* winter."

"I thought you loved the cold?" I asked.

She once went to the Swiss Alps for a family vacation. Dating someone with money and actual class was intimidating at first, but her parents are really supportive and caring. Me and Victoria had been dating for a few months by the time I met her parents. I think they knew she hoped we were going to be serious so they took it easy on me. It was the first time I'd ever met a girl's parents before. They treated me like I was part of the family and never looked back. After everything that went down with that prick from Austin Prep, they all but called me their son-in-law.

"You call *this* cold?" she grinned. "We dropped into the fifties *once* this week. When we went to Sweden, it was in the twenties for, like, an entire month. *That* is cold."

"Well, I guess you're gonna have to take me sometime and I can see for myself."

She stopped right outside of the school and gave me a kiss. She pulled away with stars in her eyes. "I guess I will."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

## Ashley

Being the brains behind an entire friend group's Homecoming plans is exhausting to say the very least. Not only did I have to plan the entire dance (a job I had absolutely no problems with because I desperately needed a distraction) but I also had to get reservations to have our hair and nails done, figure out ride plans, book reservations for the restaurant for a party of at least ten people, and put out any fires that may come up in the meantime. Not saying Casey and Heather could be doing more... but...

It was a miracle I made it through the week at all. I basically drained my Mom's liquor cabinet dry just to get through the nights. The hangovers sucked, but at least I slept.

I gave Kate a ride to school on Friday and we went over every little detail for later that day. Student Council had to run the Homecoming Court ceremony and we were going to be on special lookout for any issues like last year. Tracy may be back with us, but she wasn't allowed anywhere near the ballot box. Not after what we did last year.

Even though we had our issues before, I liked to think me and Beth worked out our differences and were cool now. Not friends but not enemies? I didn't know what we were, honestly. I mean, she talked me off the ledge and I kinda respected her for it. She actually cared about me enough to talk me through my issues and help me when I needed someone. Screaming at me for allegedly forging a fake love letter was pretty fucked up, but we apologized and I was willing to forgive it because she knew she was in the wrong. Probably.

That being said, I knew her and how her brain works. Putting Tracy back with us was probably part of some elaborate scheme to get Lauren back. My guess was she wanted Tracy to stuff the box with rigged votes so Lauren eventually won Queen and Beth could woo her back. Admirable, really, even if it was a total ripoff of the shit Kara and I pulled.

Kate got a rundown of what she'd be doing during the whole voting process during the game. I made sure to stress that when every vote was cast, she was supposed to call me and I'd come help her count. Of all the people in school—and especially of all the people on Student Council—she was the one person I trusted most to not rig it in favor of a single person. My stomach turned all day just remembering where I was a year ago.

"Whatever you need, I'm there," Kate promised. She was a good friend.

We met up with Lauren as she was walking into school. She seemed especially chipper for some reason. Much happier than she was the day before. I still need to figure out the specifics of what happened with Tracy. I didn't want to ruin her mood just yet, though.

"Ready for the game tonight?" I asked as we entered the school.

"It's just a game," Lauren said, laughing.

"Um, hello? You're going to be Homecoming Queen. Aren't you excited?"

Even without stuffing the ballots, I don't see a world where Lauren wasn't Homecoming Queen. I pretty much dropped off the face of the earth around that shitstain of a school. Michelle was gone. The only competition she had was Stacey, Brooke, Elena, and Valerie, but I'd been getting the vibe that people were sick of cheerleaders winning everything. Lauren being off the squad might be her best chance at winning this. It'd piss Stacey and Brooke off to no end, though, but it'd be worth it. Those two are snakes.

"What? No I'm not."

"Lauren, seriously, enough with the modesty. You're pretty much guaranteed to win it!"

She seemed almost taken aback by the idea. But I could tell the idea made her really, really happy. "You really think so?"

“She’s right,” Kate added. “You’re basically the only person who can win it. Unless I were to throw my hat in the ring, you have no *real* competition.”

She laughed, but I know she secretly wished she could win something like this. Kate is the kinda girl who wants to be so much more, but her insecurity keeps her from ever actually making a grab at the spotlight. She could be popular around here if she actually spoke up more often. She’s really smart and friendly. Her only drawback was her shyness. I knew because I was like her before Kara took a special interest in me. Look at how that turned out.

Lauren laughed along with Kate, not realizing the hidden self-deprecation of the comment whatsoever. “Okay... well... alright, what about you?” She looked at me as if I was secretly going to sweep the vote this year.

“Me? Seriously? After everything that happened this year? I seriously doubt there’s enough pity votes in the world to actually get me a win.”

“Oh, come on,” she said. “You absolutely could win it if you tried!”

There isn’t a culture of “campaigning” for Homecoming Queen around Arlington. That gets saved for Prom Queen and the races get pretty intense. It just kind of became a rule of thumb that two kinds of girls would win every year: Head Cheerleader or Victim of a Tragedy. I guess I can qualify for the second one and the assembly would absolutely help my chances if I played up being the victim, but I’m not shallow enough to exploit nearly being raped to get people to like me enough to win a stupid popularity contest. I want to put that part of my life far, far behind me. The nightmares are enough of a reminder of that for one day.

That leaves being Head Cheerleader and since I quit the squad, I learned from Casey and Heather that they are basically leaderless now. Brooke and Stacey and Elena divided the squad amongst themselves and no one can actually get the required number of votes to become the captain. Stacey thought she deserved the role because she was, and I quote, “Basically Kara’s best friend!” despite Kara openly stating more than once that she was a wannabe loser when we all hung out. Brooke thought she deserved it because she’s a straight-A student and was going to an Ivy League school when she graduated. And Elena was just generally unlikable. The rest of the girls were basically caught in the middle. Casey and Heather were more or less staying neutral because they are quietly hoping I rejoin the squad.

Is it wrong to feel kinda good knowing they’re falling apart without me? They never liked me much to begin with.

So without a Head Cheerleader or the survivor of tragedy to fall back on, people actually have to *think* about who they vote for. Shocking, I know. The last time this happened was when Kara was a Freshman. She said this one girl got expelled for her style of campaigning.

“*Mariana Cortez.*” Kara winced just saying her name. “She was a Senior when I first got here. Apparently she blew almost every single guy in the Senior, Junior, and Sophomore classes,” Kara said with disgust. We were over at her place buying our Homecoming dresses that evening and the topic of her inevitably winning just kinda came up. This was before everything with Grace. “I heard she even slept with some of the *girls*, too. God, she was such a whore!”

I still have no idea if that story was even true.

And now here was Lauren, the most wholesome and likable person in the world, and she refused to accept the chance at being the most popular girl in school. It was respectable, honestly. There’s so much pressure in being on top. I couldn’t hack it because my personal issues got in the way. Maybe she could have been different.

"If they vote for me, I'll do it," Lauren said, her streak of modesty continuing on. "And if not, it's not the end of the world. I have other plans for Homecoming anyway."

Before I could press her on that, the girls ran up to us.

"Sorry, we couldn't help but overhear you guys talking," Casey said happily, "but did you hear who's gonna win King this year?"

Heather pointed down the hallway. Spencer was shaking everyone's hands and fist bumping everyone who didn't want a handshake from the comfort of his chair. He was surrounded by the guys on the team, all donning their jerseys that they were going to wear later that day during the big game. He saw us looking and gave us a wide smile and wave before going back to his buddies.

"It's pretty obvious he's winning," Heather admitted.

"Yeah, I don't know why I made it sound so surprising," Casey said with a laugh. "He's more or less untouchable around here now."

Spencer did check off every category for the stereotypical Homecoming King. Most popular guy, Captain of the football team (despite not playing anymore), *and* victim of a tragedy. Anyone who doesn't vote for him might as well shoot themselves out of guilt for not following the rest of the pack.

"You think so?" Kate asked.

"Oh, absolutely," Heather said. "I mean, he survived a car accident and he's kind of, like, a hero for being right about the whole Brad thing... oh, um... sorry Ash..." I waved it off.

"*Anyways*, I hope we can see you girls at our after party!" Casey happily exclaimed.

"My house at eleven," Heather instructed. "And be sure to bring your own stuff cause we're going to run out pretty fast."

After what had happened before, I was done with partying for a *very* long time. I was more than content with drinking alone. I knew they knew I wasn't going, but they still were trying to get me to go. Kate was the wildcard here. I was curious if she'd ever go to another high school party after what happened at Spencer's. When she said okay, I was kind of impressed. I planned on telling her she could call me if she needed a ride.

The girls turned and walked away together. "Sometimes I wonder why I was friends with them," I admitted.

"What do you mean?" Kate asked. "They're nice."

"Yeah. They are. I don't know." I felt like things had been weird since I quit the squad. Like, they're still my friends, but all they want to talk about is cheerleading gossip and fill me in on every little detail of the drama going on between Brooke and Stacey. I quit the squad to get away from that and here they were shoving every little rumor and backhanded comment that was said in group chats or post-practice dinners down my throat.

"Maybe you need to talk to them about what's going on with you," Lauren offered.

"Yeah," I quietly admitted. "But I'm not going to the party. I'll probably be up all night watching movies or whatever so if either of you need a ride home after, I can come get you."

*Why are you lying? You're going to be up all night drinking because you lost out on the chance to be Lauren's Queen. Who are you trying to fool here?*

"I mean, I can stay back and we can hang out if you'd like," Kate offered. "You could come over to my place! We can watch something fun!"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Chicago? The dresses are so pretty! Plus the soundtrack is so much fun."

*A woman after my own heart.* Being the little musical theater and film buff I am, I can't turn down a night of Bob Fosse. I told her I would think about it and tell her once we got to dinner the next night before we went to the dance.

As we walked through the halls to get ready to start our day, I saw Beth watching us from inside of the gym. She looked very sad. I felt bad for her, but there was nothing I could do. If she wanted to win back Lauren, she'd need to break up her and Spencer. I really hoped it wouldn't come to that, though. They seemed so good together.

## Spencer

I don't know what got into Lauren that morning when she came over to give me a ride to school, but she couldn't keep her hands off of me. It was kinda nice to know she wanted me that badly. Great, actually. And when I was all healed up and can actually do stuff, too? It was only going to get better.

Speaking of, that was the first day I wasn't going to spend all day in the chair. I told Lauren I was going to dance with her at Homecoming and I'm going to do it if it kills me. I'll probably need to sit down every ten minutes because I don't want to overwork it, but it'll still be nice to actually be able to walk around and be kinda normal again.

We walked into school a few minutes apart so nobody would get the idea that we were together before we were ready to tell everyone and that was when I got cornered by Frank. He looked happier than I'd seen him in a long time.

"Dude! Guess what! Everybody's voting for you for Homecoming King!"

Considering I was pretty much guaranteed to win it before the year began, I wasn't as shocked as I could have been. But after everything that happened, I thought everybody would have been sick of me. Sure, I was kind of a hero because of being right about the whole Brad thing, but I also ruined the football season by getting hurt. For anyone else, that'd be the kiss of death for their popularity around their school.

I really wondered what I'd done to deserve all of this. Friends. People cared about me. A girl as amazing as Lauren. And now apparently Homecoming King?

"That's awesome."

People crowded around me and began asking for fist bumps and handshakes. Two Freshmen guys even asked for a picture. It got a little overwhelming after a while.

I glanced to my right and saw the girls looking at me. But my eyes locked on Lauren's and they never let go. She looked so beautiful that day. As usual. I couldn't wait to see her later that day in her dress. The thought made me dizzy. If we weren't saving our big reveal for later, I'd have rolled right up to her and kissed her in front of everyone.

When I did look away, though, I saw Beth staring at me with the most cold expression I'd ever seen.

## Lauren

I found Spencer hanging out down by the football field after classes were over. He wasn't anywhere near the field, though. I found him in his chair on the gravel track that connected the school to the little hill behind the main scoreboard. It was where they drove the golf carts carrying equipment and injured players to and from the school. He looked really sad watching them go through their pre-game walkthrough. Even though he could just roll down there and be accepted with open arms by his little band of brothers, he was trying his best to stay away. I knew it was killing him, though.

"Don't beat yourself up," I pleaded gently while holding his hands. "Please?"

"I'm not. I just miss them sometimes."

"I know." We paused to listen to the coaches berate Justin, who was taking over as one of Spencer's backups. He and Jamar, the other backup, were not performing to Spencer's level and the recent scores showed. "I think Beth knows."

"About us?"

"Yeah. She hasn't said anything to me about it," I said. "But she's been really distant lately. And angry. Like not even talking to me about student council stuff anymore. And she's been shooting you some dirty looks."

"Yeah, I noticed," he said. "You sure she isn't my ex or something?"

I smiled and leaned in close to him. It was nice that his shoulder didn't hurt as much anymore. I liked holding him. "Not a chance. You're too macho for her."

He glanced up at me. "Macho?"

"Yeah. I mean, you kicked Brad's ass and survived a car crash. That's pretty manly." I knew it was only right that I be honest with him.

He puffed out his chest, gave me a little grin, and deepened his voice. "It was nothing, babe. Just something you gotta do sometimes, you know?" We laughed together. I liked seeing him laugh.

"I'm not worried about the dance," I said. "I want to be with you. A hundred percent... but part of me still loves her a little. I'm trying to get over it, but it's hard. You know? But I want to see how things work with you. I just... wanted to be completely honest with you before we become official."

"I want things to work with you, too," he said. "And I understand." He laughed a little. "You sure she isn't going to stab me or anything?"

The thought had crossed my mind, but she's not like that. She's just been hurt so much already. I hated knowing I contributed to her pain over something she probably didn't even do, but I wanted this. I needed this. And if things don't work out, I know she'll always be waiting for me. "She's really mature," I said. "She'll understand."

He pulled away from me and looked me in the eyes. "Are you sure this is what you want? Like completely sure? 'Cause I don't want us to start getting serious and you start feeling bad about Beth and then run back to her." He slowly exhaled and lowered his voice. "This is gonna sound really stupid, but I don't want to get my heart broken and be alone again."

"It's not stupid. I want to be with you. And I would never just dump you for someone else. There's a reason why I chose to be with you."

I wasn't lying. I might have been a hypocrite because I did start to like him when I was with someone else, but this was gonna be different. I needed a healthy relationship for once. Ash and Beth are great in their own ways, but they needed to work on themselves first. Spencer was different. I just knew it.

"You're amazing."

“You are, too.”

I leaned in and kissed him. Just for a second. I didn’t care if someone saw. Let them see. They all would soon enough anyway. When I pulled away, I decided to go all in on us. “I have never been so sure of anything in my life.



## **THE DESTRUCTION**

## Ashley

Lauren and Beth might be in charge of Student Council as a whole, but Homecoming was my baby. I made sure this thing was going to be amazing and it all started with the football game. Even though the guys were getting their asses handed to them without Spencer (among others) there to lead them, the real main event took place during halftime. Sixteen would become eight and these lucky few would have their fates determined by a vote less than twenty-four hours away.

It was so eerily similar to last year. Most of the names and faces changed, but the process remained the same.

The massive whiteboard was filled out with the candidates and everyone gathered to see who they would be forced to choose between. I'm sure there would be more than one friendship destroyed over the chance of not winning a plastic crown and a box of chocolates we bought on sale from Target.

### 2019 Homecoming Court

**Seniors:** Stacey and Brooke; Tom and Vinny

**Juniors:** Lauren and Victoria; Spencer and Frank

**Sophomores:** Hannah Waters and Payton; Alex and Peyton

**Freshmen:** Natasha and Sara; Tyler and Mike

Mr. Hardy was very impressed by my commitment to guarding the sanctity of the ballot box. I followed through with my promise to make sure it was well-guarded. Kate and I were the only ones who held the keys to the lock, and it was a lock that I found that had been sitting around in my house for years so it's not something anyone could just run down to Home Depot and pick up a set of spare keys for. Besides Kate, I made sure Casey and Heather were around the voting booth at all times. Not exactly the Murderer's Row of elective oversight tribunal, but at least there was more than one person there at all times to make sure nothing happened and God knows Casey and Heather would chirp like birds if they saw someone tamper with it.

And, obviously, the votes were not tallied until I was present.

There was a line stretching from the voting booth all the way to the one gate. Hundreds of happy peppy ACH kids just waiting to engage in the democratic process or whatever Patrick used to rant about when he was in charge. A few of the people from Homecoming Court went up and down the line trying to gain some support, the closest thing to traditional campaigning anyone was expected (or allowed) to do. Victoria was flanked by Jasmine and Hannah. They met up with the basketball team so Victoria and Vinny could share a kiss and show everyone that no matter who won, they were their own King and Queen. They fully intended to win, though, make no mistake. They were a cute couple.

Frank and Tom were in the middle of a game so they couldn't campaign for themselves and Spencer preferred to stay in his seat than make a big show out of the whole thing. I think he was worried some people still resented him for getting hurt and blowing the season for the team. Considering how bad the score was, I could understand why he'd want to be alone. After three straight years of winning

Homecoming games, we were on pace for our worst loss of the whole season and it was only the fifth game of the year.

## Kate

I'm going to be completely honest and say I've never spoken to or even met half of the people in the Homecoming Court.

Stacey and Brooke were some of the most popular girls in the entire school and would never make time for the likes of me. I only just met Hannah Waters when Victoria and Jasmine got her the Treasurer job. The Sophomores also put forward Payton and Peyton, a guy and girl with basically the same name because they thought it'd be funny. And I'd never heard of Sara or Mike and I seriously doubted I would ever hear from them again after Homecoming was over. Two Freshmen who won't be relevant around here until well after I've graduated.

Casey and Heather were by my side and we made sure the voting went smoothly and efficiently. Ashley filled me in on what went down behind the scenes last year and told me exactly what steps to take so it wouldn't happen again. I could tell she was really remorseful over what happened. I wasn't going to judge her for it. I didn't laugh when Grace was up on that stage, though. I'd never have been able to live with myself if I did. It made me sick watching it happen in real time.

With potentially thousands of votes to tally when voting was closed, we had to be sure everyone was in and out of the booth as soon as possible. We had a few clowns try to go in and either rip up the ballots or draw as many penises as possible in the allotted twelve seconds a voter was given. We also had the snobs who thought they needed more than twelve seconds to decide who they liked most between their four candidates.

"If you don't know who you're voting for before you get into line, you shouldn't be in line at all," I said to one particularly rude Senior girl. I think she was on the basketball team. She huffed and puffed and ripped up her ballot in front of me as a sign of protest. I just let the snippets of paper fly away as she stormed off.

"Holy shit," Casey said. "You're, like, really badass!"

"Huh?"

"No, really, that was awesome!" Heather gawked.

"Do you want to get dinner after the game with us?" Casey asked. "We were thinking about getting high and going to this one diner across town that's open all night, but if there's someplace you like more we can go there, too."

I wasn't sure if this was a joke at first and kinda laughed about it. These two had never so much as said ten words to me in the three years I've known them and now they suddenly want to get dinner together? I figured they must have been taking this whole "Ashley being off the squad" thing really hard. They basically relied on her.

"Um, yeah, totally!" I said. "But I'm not gonna smoke, if that's okay with you."

"Oh, we're not smoking," Heather said as she sneakily pulled out a little sandwich bag filled with gummy bears from inside of her purse.

"I brought them when me and my parents went to Amsterdam for a wedding," Casey said. "Been saving them for a special occasion."

"No brownies?" I asked, half-joking and half terrified at seeing actual edibles for the first time in my life. God, I'm such a sheltered loser.

Heather shook her head. "I've been meaning to make some, but things have been so busy with cheer and SAT prep—"

Casey groaned. "Ugh, don't remind me about SATs. I know I'm gonna fail."

“Why do we need to take a test to decide if we’re smart enough to go to a college?” Heather asked. “If Harvard wants to accept me, it’s because I can afford to go there. What does having a bad SAT score matter if you’re totally loaded?”

“Plus it’s all about who you know,” I chimed in without thinking. “Like, connections and family friends who went there.”

Casey raised her hands and motioned to me. “*Thank you!* I knew you’d understand!”

“Did you watch *Legally Blonde*?” Heather asked. I shook my head. It was on my list, but I still had a million other things I needed to catch up on. Heather looked like she had just been stabbed. “Oh my God, we are *soooo* watching that tonight! Forget the diner, we can just get takeout and go back to my place. So, like, the guy that Elle is trying to get with, Warner, he doesn’t even have good test scores to get in. It turns out—”

“Spoilers, Heather! Fuck!” Casey exclaimed, giving me a little glance and nod as if it was a secret that I hadn’t seen the movie yet. Heather clapped her hand over her mouth and they waited in silence for me to make up my mind.

“Uh... yeah! We can go back to your place! I just gotta call my mom and let her know—”

They were too busy squealing with excitement to listen to the rest of my sentence. Heather went on about how much I was going to love the movie while Casey started looking up what restaurants we could make it to before closing to pick up dinner. That was when I saw Tracy standing at the front of a line of people patiently waiting for me to give her her ballot.

## Beth

Unfortunately for myself, Ashley was extremely thorough in planning out the defenses for the voting booth. Who would have thought that being one of the masterminds in the prank of the year would lead to being an expert at preventing someone like you from recreating your little stunt all over again? I think this is why they hire bank robbers and former convicts to design prisons and bank vaults.

With this in mind, the most simple plan to winning Lauren's heart back was out of the question. Any amateur would go through a simple romcom-grade plan of stuffing the ballot box with votes for the target of the affections and the spurned suitor so they would be forced onto the stage together, allowing the one who is unlucky in love to confess their feelings in front of the entire school and win them back through a mixture of the power of both true love and peer pressure. I believe this to be the reason why so many people choose to attempt proposals during events such as baseball games and concerts.

How easy would it be to simply grab a microphone, profess my love for Lauren in front of the entire school, and become the first openly gay Homecoming Royalty in Arlington City High history? Lauren is a massive softie who weeps when you bring her roses. She would never be able to resist me if I pulled this stunt off.

But Ash made sure Katherine was in charge of the ballots and Tracy would be watched closely when she cast her vote. Tracy was still very much working for me due to my efforts at reintegrating her back into our Cabinet and I did not intend to blow my one real "You Owe Me" on something as petty as stuffing a ballot box. And when you add in the thought of her being against this idea since her actions last year ultimately lead to Grace's suicide, I had serious doubts I would be able to convince her to do the exact same thing a second time.

Instead, I planned on waiting for Homecoming itself.

My plan was simple. Almost pathetic, really, but she is a sucker for grand gestures. I knew she was going to win Princess this year. No interference required on my part. So when she inevitably goes on to win Queen at the dance, I would approach her after she was done being showered with flowers and confetti and chocolates and tell her how much I loved her and that I wanted to change and be better. No peer pressure needed. She would be in such a good mood from winning Homecoming Queen that she would be unable to say no. After we kiss and make up, we would march back into that gym, hand-in-hand, and officially come out just like she wanted before this whole mess started. Any lingering feelings she may or may not have for Spencer would be gone once she remembers how much she loved me. Once we are the strongest couple in the entire school, we go on to win Prom Queen together, graduate, get the fuck out of this awful state, and never look back.

It was genius. I knew how she thinks. I knew she would love this. She had to love this.

## Vinny

We barely made it to our seats before the first whistle blew. Victoria and I made sure to get to the game before the gates even opened so we could campaign with the people waiting in line, something that I didn't care much about but Victoria insisted on, and we spent the next two hours shaking hands with people we probably wouldn't speak to again for the rest of high school.

I liked to think our efforts weren't in vain. Maybe we convinced a few people to vote for us. I knew there was no way I was beating Spencer, but at least I tried. Victoria seemed to take winning this pretty seriously. I don't know if she had it out for Lauren or something and this was her way of getting back at her. She was trying really hard. Almost as hard as she worked on the musical, and that was really fucking hard.

"Don't you want to dance with me in front of the entire school?" she asked me in the car. "Show everyone how much you love me?"

"I do," I said. "You know I do."

I would never say this to anyone, but I think this was how she wanted to get everyone to forget about the whole thing with that Pagano asshole from Davy Crockett. Even though everyone had been really supportive and sympathetic, she was probably terrified about being known as "the girl who got her nudes leaked" for the rest of her life and was desperately trying to be "the girl who won Homecoming Queen" instead.

I loved her more than anything. I wanted to do everything I could to help her win.

But I was distracted. Seeing Spencer sitting a few rows below me with a big smile on his face and hundreds of people going to see him as if he were some kind of foreign politician or celebrity made me sick. He wanted to ruin my life and he knew he could if I stepped out of line. Beth did me a favor by turning him in. I knew I'd need to repay her someday. But in the meantime, I was stuck doing a half-assed Homecoming King campaign just to make my girlfriend happy.

Victoria groaned when we gave up another touchdown. The rest of the crowd was equally unhappy.

"Well this is a bust," I said as I watched their kicker make the extra point and sent the North Dallas High Bulldogs up 24-10. Considering there was still 7:33 left in the half, I figured this wasn't going to let up any time soon.

Victoria craned her neck and looked around the bleachers. "Where's Lauren at?"

"Uhh... I don't know?"

"We should go around and talk to more people," she said suddenly. "Try and get any people who haven't voted yet."

"I don't think anyone who hasn't voted yet plans on actually voting at all." I tried to laugh the whole thing off and hoped Victoria would get the hint, but a look from Jasmine, who was sitting beside her, made me realize how serious she was about this whole thing.

"I mean, there has to be *someone* who hasn't voted yet," Victoria said, slightly frustrated.

"Why don't you and I go walk around while Vinny gets dressed?" Jasmine offered. She took Victoria's hand and they walked down the steps and out of sight. I was pretty relieved that Jasmine took the lead on this. I really didn't want to talk to anyone right now. I was too busy thinking of how I would get revenge on Spencer once this whole thing was over.

In the meantime, I had to put on my tux. I was gonna sweat like a pig.

## Spencer

Coach Hendrickson came to find me in the bleachers during the two minute warning. He was the Offensive Coordinator, but there were assistant coaches who could do his job, too. And besides, he didn't need to be in the booth. The Bulldogs had the ball and were threatening to score. Again. He motioned for me to come to the railing. I had to hobble my way across the white-hot bleacher just to reach him.

"I know things have been tense between you and Coach Mullens lately," he said, "but would you consider coming to the locker room at halftime? Maybe say something to get the guys motivated? It's not looking good, Spencer. They need you."

That was one of those "rock and hard place" situations.

On one hand, I was done with football. I never wanted to set foot in a locker room again. I didn't care how much money my asshole dad spent on camps and equipment and private lessons and film and gas for rides to practice. It was also nice having more freetime. Not being out in the blistering hot sun for hours and hours in full pads and instead being inside playing video games and actually enjoying myself was almost a foreign concept to me before I got hurt. Plus I was still a little mad at Coach Mullens and was actively trying to avoid him. Nothing he could say would ever get me back on the field in a uniform again. I was done.

But on the other hand, I knew Coach Hendrickson was right. They needed me. If I was supposed to be the leader around that school, fucked as it may be, I needed to start acting like it.

"You can count on me."

Lauren and a couple of the guys helped me down the steps and I walked towards the tunnel that led onto the field before sitting down in the chair Lauren stashed by the voting booth for safe keeping. Coach Hendrickson waved off the cops and I hobbled my way to the edge of our sideline. Nobody seemed to notice me. I couldn't blame them. The Bulldogs scored again as time expired in the half.

I made it to the locker room before the rest of the guys. I sat on the far side of the room and waited for them to arrive. When they did enter our little concrete bunker, Frank threw his helmet at the wall in disgust. It rolled toward me and we locked eyes. He seemed to calm down a bit when he saw me. The rest of the guys funneled in behind him.

While the Coaches talked outside, the guys were left to dwell on what was going on by themselves. Tom said it best when he said what was on everyone's mind. "This sucks. It really sucks."

Jamar, who had been the starting quarterback this week, hung his head with shame. "I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say." After just two quarters, he threw three picks and barely a hundred yards.

"Don't be," Frank grumbled. "Everyone's playing like shit right now."

"It could be worse," I said. Everyone looked at me, a few for the first time since they got inside. "Don't you guys remember last year when we faced Amarillo in the playoffs last year? When we were down by thirty at half and everyone just wanted to go home and die? What happened, Frank?"

Frank sat up, realizing what I was doing and wanting to help. "We won. By ten."

"It's different now," Dwayne complained. "We don't have you."

"So? I'm just one guy. What's that thing people say? No man is an island? Football isn't about one guy doing everything. If it was, the Packers would have won at least seven Super Bowls by now because of Aaron Rodgers." I took a few steps into the middle of the room, my crutches clacking off the concrete floor. "Just because things haven't been going so well now doesn't mean they won't get better. We were supposed to win States this year because the entire team is one of the best in the country, man! I know I couldn't win it without you so don't act like you can't win it without me! I've never played with a



better football team in my entire life! So stop moping and saying that you guys suck. Everyone has a bad day. Don't let that one day ruin your life."

I heard the door clink shut behind me and the entire coaching staff stood in silence. Coach Mullens, despite totally wanting to murder the guys for underperforming, actually looked... relaxed.

"Frank, Tom," Coach Mullens said, "you're needed outside. The rest of you, meet with your position coaches and figure things out."

Frank held the door open for me and Tom. Before I left, Coach nodded at me. It felt good to know he respected me again. I couldn't stay mad at him. Not after the talk we had. I kept my head high as I walked down to the field with the guys. The crowd began clapping as the rest of Homecoming Court descended onto the field in their tuxedos and dresses. I decided against wearing my tux. I wanted Lauren to be surprised at how well I can clean up if I actually try.

The game didn't matter anymore for me now. It was showtime.

## Beth

I stood in line at the concession stand nearest the voting booths. As soon as the horn blew to signal it was halftime, I tensed up. Everything was riding on Lauren winning Princess. Even if she lost, though, I could fall back on being a shoulder to cry on. But I did not envision a world where Lauren Bradshaw, the hottest girl in the entire country, would lose a popularity contest to Victoria Falco. Despite being extremely pretty herself, she simply does not hold a candle to Lauren's beauty. Or spotless reputation.

Katherine had joined me in line as we discussed the details of the ceremony. She had just finished counting the votes with Ashley and was eager for a snack after working all afternoon. As I resisted the urge to ask her who had won, she looked over my shoulder and gasped with delight. I turned my head and saw what she saw. It was breathtaking.

Everyone elected into Homecoming Court were expected to wear their dresses and tuxedos that they were wearing to the dance. Add a bit of flavor and elegance to the whole thing. Despite my constant prodding while we were together, Lauren had never told me what she intended to wear. My eyes were bathed in the most beautiful strapless yellow dress I had ever seen in my entire life. It was pretty low cut so there was no risk of it touching the concrete or the turf on the field. Despite possibly coming off as a bit too slutty, it was perfect. She could cut it as low as she wanted; it did nothing to dispel any of the pure elegance she was displaying for the entire school to see.

I had to resist the urge to run to her and tell her how much I loved her. I could wait a few hours more. Patience is a virtue. She would love me again. I just knew it.

"She looks amazing," Katherine said with awe.

"Yeah. She does." I couldn't stop myself. I had to follow after her and watch her win. O'Reilly had to announce the winners as soon as they reached the sideline so the game could continue. I needed to find a spot in the bleachers to watch the love of my life achieve greatness.

"Wait, aren't you hungry?!" Katherine called out.

I couldn't stop now. I had to see this thing through.

## Ashley

After two recounts in a row, I never wanted to count another ballot for the rest of my life. I found Casey and Heather and managed to get a spot beside them. The big reveal was coming, but now that I knew who won I really didn't care anymore. I was happy for them, they deserved it, blah blah blah. I was just glad it was done.

I was busy scrolling through my phone when I heard Casey and Heather start happily chirping, "Look! Look! Ashley, look! She looks amazing! Look at that dress!"

My eyes glanced up from my phone and I instantly saw what they were gushing over. The dress was as bright as the sun and it matched her hair perfectly. She was like a sunflower. In an instant, every old wound that I was working so hard to heal burst wide open. Every regret I'd had from last year flowed in my mind like a tidal wave crashing down on my heart.

I was in love with her all over again. And I hated myself for it.

"Ash?" Casey asked. "What's wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"You seem... sad," Heather said. "Did something happen?"

"What? No. I'm fine."

"Are you?" Heather asked.

"You know if you're upset, you can talk to us, right?" Casey asked. "Even if we aren't cheering together anymore, we're still your friends."

I wanted to hug them so badly. I missed them. We weren't nearly as close anymore since I quit. If there weren't a thousand people around us, I actually did consider telling them why I was upset. I hated keeping this secret. And they were my friends. I knew they'd still love me no matter what...

I held up my phone and began texting in the group chat I hadn't used in a few weeks, their hundreds of messages left on read. I prayed I wouldn't regret this.

*I know we haven't really talked much lately. I'm sorry.*

**Casey:** *don't be what's going on?*

**Heather:** *is everything okay?*

*Yeah, I'm fine. Can I tell you something only a few people know?*

**Casey:** *of course!*

**Heather:** *yeah what's up?*

I had to hold my breath before sending the next one. My hands shook as I typed and retyped. It was only two words, but it might as well have been a novel.

*I'm gay.*

Casey and Heather's eyes lit up. "**REALLY?!**" they shouted in unison. I almost jumped out of my seat. But what terrified me more was somebody trying to read our texts after seeing that we were talking about something so shocking that they would scream like that. I quickly motioned to the phones and they went back to typing.

**Casey:** *Really??????*

**Heather:** *REALLY?!?!?!?!?*

I nodded. Their smiles stretched across their faces. "Why didn't you tell us?" Casey asked.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I just wasn't ready."

"We wouldn't hate you or anything," Heather said. "And we don't now, I promise."

"We'll be your friends no matter what," Casey said.

I'm not ashamed to admit I started crying. That was all I'd ever wanted to hear in my entire life. "I love you girls so much." They reached over and held me tight. I never felt so wanted before. So accepted.

"Are you going to Homecoming with anyone?" Casey asked.

"Right now, just Lauren and Kate," I said. "And the guys. I think. I'm not really sure who all is coming. Things might change. We're all going to dinner first, though."

"We could meet up with you at the dance, if you'd like," Heather offered.

"Or maybe meet up with you guys and all get dinner together?" Casey asked. "If that's okay."

I didn't care if it ruined my original reservation. I needed to spend more time with them again. "I'd like that."

## Beth

“Ladies and gentlemen,” O’Reilly called out through a wave of feedback from the microphone that made everyone in the arena jump from shock. “Um... sorry... Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please? It is now time to announce the Homecoming Princes and Princesses for the 2019 Homecoming Court!”

A wave of applause rocked through the stadium. I prayed O’Reilly did not assume for a second that it was for him. Who would clap for this middle-aged idiot?

He opened the envelope. “For the Freshmen... Natasha Lopez and Tyler Benjamin!”

I was getting a sense of déjà vu. It was almost as if I had lived through this exact same ceremony before. The memories flooded back through me and I nearly threw up. I will never forget the day I got the call from her mother saying that she was gone.

“For the Sophomores... Hannah Waters and Alex Weatherspoon.”

Things would be different this time around. There were no schemes or plots to ruin someone’s life. No one was going to die. I would get the girl and I would be happy. I deserve it and she does, too. We were meant for each other. After all we’ve been through, it was fate.

“For the Juniors... Lauren Bradshaw and Spencer Barnett.”

I let out the breath I had been holding in since I first saw her in that dress. The hardest part was over. Winning her back would be child’s play. I convinced her to fall in love with me once and I knew damn well that I could do it again. She loves me. She only forgot. I had been coming up with some ways to convince her she was wrong about the whole thing with the phone and the pictures. Even if she was adamant that I was guilty, I could always admit it and try to sway her to my point of view. Brad was gone and Ashley was in a better place now. Lauren had to see I was the good guy here. I talked Ashley out of killing herself. How can Lauren not love me forever for that? I saved a girl’s life. I’m the good guy.

“And for the Seniors... Brooke Nguyen and Vinny Romano!”

We were meant for each other. When we are apart, we are nothing. She has to see this. I thought about it every night. We need each other. She can never understand how much I need her in my life. No matter how hard she tries, it is impossible to explain to her how much I love her. She brought me from the deepest pit I have ever been in my entire life. She just has to remember that she needs me, too.

“Folk... give it up for your 2019 Homecoming Court!”

The hard part is over. The easy part begins now.

## Lauren

It might be super girly to say this, but winning Princess made me so happy. I felt beautiful. After doing nothing but crying for the past few weeks since Beth and I broke up, it was amazing to actually be *seen* by people. I wasn't the girl getting laughed at in the gym after being called a slur and then drawing even more laughs for lashing out over it. I wasn't the "other popular girl" playing second fiddle to Ashley. This was my moment. People *wanted* me.

But nobody here wanted me more than the guy standing beside me. He held my hand up high after everyone's names were called out. Everyone was cheering for us and wanted to see us win the whole thing the next day at the dance. But little did they know I already won. Even though I won a popularity contest, I was just a princess on paper. The crown we got was just plastic. I found someone who was good to me and treated me like a real Princess.

He turned to face me with that goofy smile on his face. "You look beautiful." He was absolutely mesmerized by me. I couldn't wait to show him what I was going to look like with my hair done up. We were going to own that fucking dance together.

I grabbed his face and kissed him as hard as I could. We'd kissed like this a hundred times before by now, but this was different. Being able to show everyone how much you care about someone is the most powerful feeling in the world. It's why they have you "kiss the bride" at weddings. Everyone gets to see how much you love the person you're with. And I do think I loved him at that point. Just a little bit.

To say the crowd went ballistic would be an understatement. The ground was shaking as we kissed. It was louder than they had been for the entire first half. I felt like a gladiator in the colosseum and they were the cheering spectators watching me slay the lion. And I know Spencer was into it. I practically had to pry him off of me. We wouldn't have that problem once we got back to my place, though.

I never felt more beautiful in my entire life when he held me in his arms for the entire school to see.

## Tracy

Nobody saw it coming. Nobody.

When Lauren and Spencer started making out in the middle of the field, everybody went insane. If anyone ever suspected them of secretly dating, word never got out. Hookups in the tutoring room at school are one thing, but I never would have thought they would do something like *this*. I wonder what they would have done if they'd lost. Save the big show for the dance? Just appear together and casually break the news? Mr. Five Star Prospect was anything but a casual kinda guy.

After the shock faded a bit, even I found myself clapping for them. Lauren might have every reason in the world to hate me, but I can't be mad at her. I almost ruined her life. Seeing her actually be happy was nice. I was really happy for her and hoped things would work out.

One person who didn't feel the same way was sitting three rows below me. She didn't clap. Didn't cheer. Any cheering she did passed as soon as their lips locked. She was the loudest person in the stadium when Lauren was announced Junior Class Princess, to the point where people actually laughed at her for cheering so loud, and here she was as quiet as the grave.

She stood there in total silence until they broke apart to wave to everyone. Once things had reached a fever pitch, she stepped out into the aisle and hurried back underneath the grandstand. I had to see what happened next. I thought the incident with the note would be what finally brought her back to reality, but this was more than I ever could have dreamed of. After all she'd done to me, I wanted to see this. I *needed* to see this.

I followed her through the concourse and out the gate toward the parking lot. She never saw me. She was staring forward with her head held high. I made sure to be far enough away so she'd never suspect she was being followed. She ducked into a row of cars and I knelt down beside one, looking closely to see what she did or where she went next.

She stood in front of Lauren's car. I thought she was going to start bashing it with her bare hands. They were clenched into fists and I could see the muscle in her neck tensing up as she stood over the hood.

And then she started to cry.

Beth leaned forward and steadied herself with one opened hand pressed firmly against the hood, her hand probably searing from the hot sun cooking the metal for the past however many hours. If it hurt, she didn't show it. She collapsed to her knees, her sobs beginning to echo through the empty city streets around us. She buried her face into her elbow to stifle the noise. After crying against the hood for about a minute, she finally collapsed back onto the ground. She curled up into a ball as the tears dripped onto the pavement. She rocked back and forth as her muffled sobs turned to open weeping.

I watched her cry for five straight minutes. And something finally clicked in my head.

After what happened to Grace, she's all alone. I don't know if they were just friends or if they were dating, but it doesn't matter now. All she had was Lauren and now she was making out with Spencer in front of the entire school. The one person she ever loved left her for the most stereotypical guy in the world. Every cheesy high school romcom has the pretty Homecoming Queen end up with the star football player. They never show the sad girl who gets her heart broken in the process. She doesn't get the happy ending because it's not her movie.

She didn't deserve this. She didn't deserve to have her heart broken. She might have done some shitty things, but she was a victim. She just hates the world for everything that's happened to her and her

best friend. And now I regretted everything I'd done to ruin her life. The note, the pictures, Homecoming. Everything. I helped drive her to this. I was as much at fault as Kara Alderman for ruining her.

I came down here to feel superior because the person I hated most in the world was heartbroken. I stood and walked away seeing her in a different light. I didn't deserve to watch her squirm. She needed some privacy.



## Beth

I allowed myself exactly ten minutes to cry my eyes out. When that time ran out, I wiped my eyes. I lacked the energy to sit up so I resigned myself to stare at the night sky, the stars blurred by the light from the big city around me. My hand was on fire and my clothes were covered in dirt, my shirt clinging to my skin that was stinging from the scorching hot blacktop. I felt nothing except pain. Pain and rage.

Ever since I bought the extra cell phones from Damien, I made sure to never leave home without at least one tucked into my sock. If the need ever arose, I would be ready. Like one of those jock assholes keeping a condom in their pocket in the event some whore cheerleader decided to put out after the first date. Because that's what they are: assholes who only care about themselves.

I had the number memorized. It rang four times before he finally picked up.

"Hello?"

"It's Beth. New number."

"Oh."

"I reached out to Spencer before the game. We had to talk about Ashley and Homecoming. He told me not to tell you this... but he said he's sick of kissing your asses and expects you to pay up one day. Then he said some very interesting things about Victoria."

"What did he say?"

"When I asked him why you would pay up, he told me he had reached out to that Pagano kid's brother from Davy Crockett. Apparently they went to middle school together. The brother said they had more pictures of Victoria that never got leaked saved on a secret flash drive. And here's the real kicker... apparently Spencer was the one who leaked the pictures of Ashley to everyone as a way of proving that Brad tried to rape her. Said he paid the kid who took the pictures a lot of money. Some kid named Harold Dermott. Ends justify the means situation, you know? What's to stop him from doing it again?"

There was silence for a long time. I thought he had hung up on me to go kill him.

"Why are you telling me this?"

I paused and prepared myself to say what I had been rehearsing in my head ever since I stopped crying. "I want you to listen to what I'm going to say before you do anything. Spencer Barnett is a manipulative coward who uses people to get what he wants. He has no morals, no principles, no sense of honor... He's scum. He will do whatever it takes to get ahead in life. He used me to get close to Lauren and now he's using me to threaten you. Don't buy that nice guy bullshit act he puts on."

"I never did."

"Good. And to answer your question from before, Lauren is my best friend in the whole world. I'd die before I let her date that piece of shit. Whatever you do, do it fast and believe me, he won't go to O'Reilly if you try to take him down. Odds are half the football team will fail a test if he turns your guys in. Don't trust anything he says."

"I don't."

"Are you going to Homecoming?"

"We all are."

"Good. I'll see you there."

I snapped the phone in half and removed the battery and SIM card. After stuffing them in my pocket, I stopped to think about what was going to happen. I was about to have two loose ends to deal with. Unless Vinny and his goons actually committed to murdering Spencer, I could not simply report

them to the police. Until the opportunity arose where I could bury any evidence of my involvement, I was stuck as the middleman in a feud I was actively adding gasoline to.

But I really didn't give a shit anymore.

Whatever happens with these idiots is going to happen. I was simply giving them the little nudge they needed to escalate from a cold war to a full world war. This pathetic prank war that's been going on for over a decade was a waste of everyone's time. They would thank me for this one day. If anything, I believed I was doing them a favor. This is valuable life experience. Never trust anyone and no one can ever hurt you.

Homecoming was less than twenty-four hours away. The hard part was over. Now comes the easy part.

## Lauren

My parents hadn't been together for a few years going into my Junior year. I spent most of my life blaming myself for their separation. It's something I had to learn to live with. They tried to coexist and be "friends" or whatever they decided to call themselves, but we all knew it was a lie. Special events were the only time we felt like a real family, but that was a lie, too. Birthdays, holidays, school dances. I remember how happy Mom was to see me in the blue dress I wore to Prom last year. I didn't even want to go after what happened with Ashley, but I knew it'd make us feel like a family for a few hours again.

This year, I didn't have ulterior motives. Not exactly.

Spencer came over a little after four. He looked so handsome with his tux. He even got his hair trimmed a little. He'd been letting it grow out for most of the year. He had a bit of a young Heath Ledger thing going. He decided to spoil the surprise by sending me a picture of himself in his tux ahead of time. I told him I was going to surprise him.

I made him schmooze with my parents for a little bit before I made my big entrance. I'm a sucker for those movies where the girl slowly walks down the stairs in her fancy dress and the guy is transfixed on her. I'd wanted to be one of those girls ever since I was little. I had moments like that with Ashley and Beth, but we always had to go with a group and I walked out into the living room with two or three other girls beside me. I never got a one-on-one moment with them. I couldn't even look them in the eye for too long or else someone might suspect something.

Now I could.

When I walked down those stairs, I felt like a celebrity on the red carpet. Everyone was staring and I knew each one of them loved me. But when I looked down at Spencer, everything just felt right. He had the biggest smile on his face and he didn't even think about blinking. He didn't pretend to hide anything. He was falling in love with me.

Spencer gently held me in his arms, his crutches leaning against the wall, and whispered in my ear, "You're so beautiful." I heard the camera clicking and the flash illuminating from behind him. I couldn't help but laugh. My parents were such dorks.

"You two look amazing," my Dad said. I knew he meant it.

I looked at Spencer and gave him a little signal to see if he was ready to do this. Spencer nodded back and held my hand tight in his. "Speaking of us two... we have an announcement."

"Oh God, you're engaged," was my Mom's immediate thought.

"What? No—"

"Oh, Christ, you're *pregnant*!?" My Dad looked like he was about to have a heart attack.

"No! Dad, Jesus, no—"

Spencer, ever the leader, stepped up. "No, no, nothing like yet, I promise, um... Sir. Ma'am. I would like to be your daughter's boyfriend. With your permission, of course."

It was his idea to make this some big show. I guess he wanted to seem all traditional or something. Make himself as if he wasn't worthy of me or something. Kinda old fashioned and regressed women's individual rights by a century or two and incredibly ironic because my Dad was probably the most progressive millionaire in history, but I said I'll allow it this one time when he pitched the idea to me. Whatever he was thinking must have worked because my parents exhaled and laughed with each other over the whole thing.

"Oh, thank God," my Dad exclaimed. "Holy shit, I thought I was going to have a heart attack there."

"You're telling me," my Mom said. "I'm too young to be a grandma."

"Please don't," I begged.

"Look, Spencer," my Dad began. "Spencer right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Spencer. You seem like a very nice boy. And I hear you're the high school quarterback." I could instantly tell that he wanted to correct him, but he bit his tongue and let him talk. "It takes a lot of guts to play that position. And brains. And responsibility. And some damn toughness if you can go through all of... this," he said, motioning to Spencer's leg and shoulder, "and still want to go dance with Lauren. So if you promise to be as compassionate and considerate as your little teenage mind is capable of being... then you have permission to date my daughter."

We all turned to my Mom. She shook her head and smiled and said, "Well, shit, you're the first guy she's ever brought home so you must be doing *something* right."

"Just please, God, no babies. Not until you're 30. Maybe 35 just to be safe."

"None, sir, I swear."

"Yes, well, have fun tonight," my Dad said with a smile. "And I want her home before midnight. She knows she has a curfew."

I cleared my throat a little. "Actually, that was something I wanted to talk to you about. I was planning on staying over Kate's house tonight."

"Lauren..."

"No funny business, I swear. It's just gonna be me, Kate, maybe Ashley and Casey and Heather and Tom." I regretted saying so many people would be there. It really did sound like a party. "Trust me, it's nothing serious. I lost my taste for partying a little while ago."

"And I need to get on my meds by midnight. Trust me, they put me out like a light."

Okay so it was a bit of a lie, but it's not like we weren't going to be out drinking all night or anything. Spencer's sister was off at Candice's house tonight and his dad was God knows where. The idea of us having the house to ourselves was a dream.

My Dad looked at my Mom, who shrugged. I was with him this weekend so it was his call. "Fine. But *call me* or *text me* or... shit, page me! Whatever you gotta do, just do it before you get to this Kate girl's house and again when you get there."

I gave him the tightest hug of my life. "Promise."

He kissed the top of my head, spun me around a little, and said, "You look so beautiful, Laurie." Spencer leaned over and mouthed *Laurie?* to me. I glared at him. I hated the nickname, but he'd been calling me Laurie since I was a little girl. "Alright. Have fun tonight. Both of you."

"We will! Thank you, sir. Ma'am." Spencer and my Dad shook hands before Spencer held mine and we went off to our first dance together.

I had a feeling this was going to be the first of many more to come.

## Kate

Compared to the dresses Casey and Heather were wearing, I felt like I had just joined an Amish community. My dress was a pale blue color and it stretched all the way down to my ankles. Casey and Heather were wearing these pink dresses that were so short that I thought I was going to be flashed when they bent over to check their shoes.

They didn't seem to mind, though. They were too busy gawking at me instead.

"I love your nails!" Casey exclaimed. "Who did them?"

"Wait, really?" I asked. Compared to the pearl white press-on talons they were sporting, mine were nothing special. Just some robin egg blue with a few little rhinestones put on them for fun. "My aunt owns a salon downtown."

"*Please* set us up sometime, those look gorgeous!" Heather pleaded. "I like these, but I kinda wish I'd done something a little more simple now, you know? Not, like, in a bad way, swear."

We ended up talking about each other's hair and nails for ten minutes while we waited for Ashley to show up. I didn't have a lot of friends growing up, much less girl friends. And no sisters. I never really got a chance to dress up and act girly with anyone. It was quite nice, actually.

Everything we said to each other paled in comparison to how they acted when Ashley made her grand debut. Casey and Heather shrieked so loud, I thought the windows were going to crack. Ash's dress was as white as her teeth and also went down to her ankles like mine. Her hair was done up in curls that flowed down her shoulders.

She looked like a princess. There is no other way to put it.

"Holy shit," I said when Ashley walked over to us. Ashley smiled.

"You look incredible!" Heather yelled.

"That dress is perfect on you!" Casey said, admiring the fabric.

Ashley looked like she was going to weep. "Thank you so much. You all look totally amazing, too. Anybody know when Lauren and Spencer will get here?"

Hearing their names together was still weird. Seeing them kiss absolutely broke my heart, but I was foolish for ever thinking we had a chance together. Casey and Heather swore they were going to set me up with a football player tonight, but the one I wanted was dating the hottest girl in school.

The doorbell rang a hundred times in rapid succession. It kinda scared the hell out of me. Casey ran over and opened it. Frank was standing there with the other guys from the team. He gave each of us a once over and whistled. "Well, don't we all look nice?"

## Spencer

Frank was busy setting up his phone on a tripod Ashley had sitting around the house. Me and Lauren were the last ones to get to her house and it took the girls ten minutes of gushing over each others' dresses to actually get the picture organized.

Much of an asshole as I was for saying it, I couldn't stop myself from yelling out, "Hurry up, dumbass, I'm hungry!" Lauren squeezed my hand, stifling a laugh. I ran my thumb over hers. She had such soft hands.

Frank was clearly struggling. "Quit crying, you big crippled baby."

"Hey, I don't think you can say that anymore," Heather said. Tom laughed and kissed her on the forehead.

"If he has a problem, he can stumble over here and say something to my face."

"I can shove my crutch up your ass, if you'd like."

"We should have gone with a farm theme," Ashley said. "He could've been the scarecrow."

"With a face like that, he'd be a natural," Kate said to Casey and Heather. They broke out into a fit of laughter. Ashley was cackling like a witch. Kate looked so proud of herself. I smiled and gave her the finger. Politely, of course.

Frank ignored us and fiddled with the knobs. "Alright, ten seconds... and... go!" He rushed back over and stood beside us. He nearly knocked me over, but I regained my footing at the last moment before the flash blinded us all. He walked back over to be sure it actually took a good one. "Damn! This one's a keeper!" He held up both of his middle fingers. "Right here. All of you. Take a look."

"Great minds think alike," Ashley said before glancing at me. I gave her the finger, too. Frank and I rapid-fired off a dozen birds at all of them. Not like they didn't deserve it.

"Can we go now?" I asked after having my fun. I hadn't eaten since breakfast cause I wanted to be nice and starved for dinner like it was Thanksgiving.

"God, Frank's right," Lauren complained. "You *are* a big baby."

His ears perked up immediately. "Did someone just say I'm right?"

"Don't get too used to it," Ashley said.

"Yeah, what's that thing they say about broken clocks?" Kate asked.

Frank sarcastically glared at her. "She's been hanging out with us for two days and she's already got jokes. Okay, I see how it is."

Lauren had suddenly started hanging out with Kate in the days leading up to the election. Ever since then, she'd really been connecting with her. She seemed like a cool girl so I didn't really mind when she third wheeled with us. Really quiet, though.

## Kate

They say to fake it till you make it. I was doing exactly that. Imagine telling me a year ago that I'd be cracking jokes about Frank Newman to his face with friends. I'd say you were insane and sulk away, wishing I was so bold. Having a couple cool friends really does bring out the best *and* the worst in you. I still had to do a handstand over a keg, but the night was young.

I took Lauren aside while everyone else was admiring each other's outfits and discussing plans for the night to ask her something that had been bugging me ever since the football game. I knew the answer, but I wanted to hear it directly from her.

"So, hey, question, um... are you and Spencer..."

She smiled sweetly and nodded. "Yeah. As of yesterday. Isn't it awesome?"

"Yeah, no, totally. But, like... what happened with Beth? Did something happen?"

"I broke her heart," she said flatly.

"What happened?"

Lauren glanced back at Spencer and stared at him. It was the same way I'd been staring at him for ages. "Him."

"Oh."

While I stared at him, I could feel her eyes drilling holes into my head. She absolutely knew and I knew she knew. "Aww, Kate. Did you..."

"What? No."

"Kate, come on. Don't lie."

I sighed. "Okay, fine." I lowered my voice and took a step closer to her so nobody else would hear. "Yeah. I have a crush on him. But I'm glad you two are happy. And I hope you know I'd never do anything to get between you two. I mean, he'd be an idiot to go from you to me."

She smiled. "Don't say that. If there was ever anyone he could leave me for, I'd rather it be you than some other asshole because I know he'd be in good hands with you. And I promise I'll help you find a nice guy sometime, if that helps. Just name someone you think is cute and I'll make it happen. Promise."

That's the phrase I've been hearing for so long from people who claimed to be my friends. "I'll help you find someone." I've heard it a thousand times before. I always held out hope that they'll hold up their end of the deal, but they never do. I'm always the bridesmaid and later never comes. My life doesn't revolve around being in a relationship, but I knew I was ready for one. My biggest problem was I set my standards too high and I knew that. But it's not like I was desperately trying to lose my virginity or anything. That was the last thing I wanted. I just wanted to meet someone and get to know them. Know what it's like to feel loved for a change. Wanted.

Even though she just broke my heart all over again without even knowing it, I hugged her and thanked her. When we pulled away, I asked the other question that had been burning in my mind since they kissed. "So what happens when Beth sees you tonight?"

Lauren closed her eyes and said sternly, "I'm hoping she understands."

"And if not?"

"I'm with Spencer now. That's it. We're over and there's nothing she can do about it."

"Can I just... ask you something personal?"

"Like you haven't been doing that this whole time?" She winked, but I could sense she was getting annoyed at my prying.

I nervously laughed. “Yeah, right. No, but seriously, I’m just worried you’re... rushing into this. You know?”

“No? What do you mean?”

“Well... I mean, you *just* broke up with her not too long ago, right? Is it really healthy to just jump straight into another relationship?”

Lauren’s smile faded. She looked hurt I would even consider asking that. “Kate, seriously, can we please just drop this? I don’t want to talk about this right now.”

I saw Ashley watching us. “I’m sorry,” I said. Lauren forgave me and walked away to rejoin Spencer. While they kissed and Frank *awwwwwwed* them from out of the striking distance of Spencer’s crutches, I approached Ashley. With just a simple nod, I knew Ashley would talk to her for me. I nodded and we went our separate ways.

We all hurried outside after Spencer kept crying about being hungry and got into each other’s cars. Lauren brought her dad’s SUV so all the girls could pile into the car together. The guys split between Frank and Tom’s cars. Spencer probably would have gotten everyone if he still had his truck, but it’s currently decaying in a scrapyard.

“You have the directions in case we get separated, right?” Lauren called out as she put the keys in the ignition.

Frank smiled. “Spencer’s my copilot. How can we possibly get lost?” He revved his engine as loud as it could go and sped off down the street while Tom followed carefully behind them, shaking his head at their recklessness when Frank managed to bounce off the sidewalk.

Ashley looked mortified. “For fuck’s sake, Frank!” she yelled.

“Spencer already almost died once this year,” Heather said. “He doesn’t need to do it again.” Lauren glared back at her from the passenger’s seat. Heather blushed. “Oh, uh... sorry. Lauren. Bad joke.”

“Frank said whoever gets there last has to pay,” Casey reminded everyone. “We should probably get going because if Tom thinks I’m paying for his dinner, he’s gonna be really disappointed.”

“Don’t worry,” Ashley said. “They’re gonna pay.”

“How do you know?” Lauren asked. “They’re already a mile away from us.”

“Because the restaurant is in *that* direction,” Ashley said, pointing down the other end of her street. She turned the car on and pulled out of her driveway at an easy pace. We were at the restaurant within ten minutes. It took the guys a half-hour to double back. They were very unhappy that they lost the bet.

Lauren and I didn’t talk much during dinner. I think she was still mad at me. I felt like shit for what I said. I wasn’t lying, I had absolutely no intention of breaking them up. I was happy for them. But I was worried that she fell for him for all the wrong reasons. Rushing from one serious relationship to another doesn’t come off as healthy to me. I might not be an expert on relationships, but I do know that she and Beth barely had any time away from one another. Whatever went down really messed both of them up. Suggesting that Lauren might need a break from dating for a little bit might have been wrong, but it might be the best thing for her.

But I wasn’t doing it to split them up. I’m not a selfish bitch like that.



## Beth

I detest dressing up. Wearing that stupid fucking tuxedo for the election was a mistake. It made me a pathetic hypocrite. If you need to wear expensive dresses and put flowers on your wrist or in your hair to feel beautiful, you are nothing but vain and self-conscious. Even the ugliest human beings imaginable are more attractive than people who splatter themselves with makeup and dye their hair to feel good about themselves. The tux was just a thing to get people talking. Remind them that you don't need to be all frilly and girly to be in charge.

I know I was not as pretty as someone like Lauren or Ashley. At the same time, though, I was leagues above the likes of Katherine and Tracy. I am very open about my normalcy and will continue to do so. It is by no means a cry for attention or generic compliments like *Oh, don't say that, you're beautiful the way you are!* that anyone would say to their friend who is considering shaving their head after a bad breakup.

For Homecoming 2019, I decided to make myself as lowly as any of these people.

I absolutely broke the bank. My dress cost a little over five hundred dollars and I refuse to disclose how much the hair and nails appointment were. I had barely any money left to my name and if I was ever going to get out of this rathole country, I would need to figure out a new way to make serious money. Homecoming would be what I considered to be a "business expense." There's no sense packing up and leaving if the girl you want to go with is dating someone else. If I needed to drop my piggybank onto the concrete and count the pennies, so be it.

Like Jimmy James said in that cute little song about pompous egotistical fashion designers: "Beauty has a price."

As I stared at myself in the mirror, it was like I was seeing someone else staring back at me. I told them I wanted blonde streaks and they did it. I told them I needed the best eyeliner they had that would match my eyes and dress. My nails were bright red, my lips even brighter. The dress was the final touch. I suspected Lauren would go with either red or blue to compliment her hair so I decided to bet on the blue and went with a red dress of my own. Dating a girl with pristine blonde hair makes you realize what goes well with her hair, especially when she either exclusively wears bright clothing to go with those yellow locks or black t-shirts featuring bands I did not personally care for but would go to their concert if she asked.

All things considered, I have to admit that I looked pretty hot.

Mistakes began to play over and over and over again in my mind. Every little problem that led to our breakup. All the things we did wrong. All the careless decisions on my part, all the cries for help I ignored. I know I practically drove them together. I should have done more to keep them apart. I should've known she would fall for him. I can't compete with a quarterback.

*No. Don't talk like that, you pathetic fucking loser. You already lost one love of your life. If you lose this one, you might as well kill yourself. Everyone you've ever loved is gone. Why stick around and feel like shit? No. Not again. Tonight is your chance to win her back. Remind her why she fell in love with you to begin with. You did it before, you can do it again. You don't deserve her and you never did.*

And take down that smug prick or die trying.

## Vinny

My older brother and I couldn't be more different if we tried.

I'm six foot-five, he's five-four. I've got loads of friends, he's a self-admitted loner. I'm the Captain of the Basketball Team, he was the head of the A.V. Club. When we'd pass in the halls, everybody would be shocked when I'd give the kinda dweeby kid a fistbump and hug. Nobody could believe we were brothers until we took out our IDs to compare addresses. He never minded, though. He thought it was kinda funny.

Terry's a big movie guy. And I mean *big*. He's the type with a photographic memory that never forgets a name. Ask him who won Best Actress in 1983 and he'll say it without even trying. Guy was born for Jeopardy. If I ever needed a movie recommendation, I'd go to him. I'm not ashamed to admit some of his suggestions made Victoria throw herself at me. Dude might not have any game, but damn if he doesn't know exactly what girls like. I envied that.

Over the summer, I got sick. Like really sick. Missed practice for a week because I couldn't stop throwing up and had a fever of 102.3. I really thought I was gonna die a few times.

One of my weird traditions I do when I get sick is watch weird movies. I don't know why I do it, but my brain loves being zonked from lack of sleep and then turning on a really bizarre black and white movie and just having the weirdest dreams. I'm probably going to get addicted to LSD one day. So whenever I got sick, I texted T and he brought in a bunch of movies he... ahem... *acquired*... from the internet that magically got burned onto DVDs. Our house was full of the things, especially back before I learned I could cut out the middleman and just stream the movies from totally legal websites. He'd buy blank discs and cases in bulk and just spend his afternoons making bootlegs. He never even sold them. He just said he wanted to have physical copies to preserve them or whatever.

On the third day of my being sick as a dog, he brought me one he said was a personal favorite. "Set in a prison camp. Really funny, but also a whodunnit." I guess the plot was about some guy betraying the prisoners or something? To be honest, I passed out after like ten minutes.

I remember waking up around two in the morning in a daze. I had the weirdest dreams and I thought I was still sleeping before I realized I was awake because the movie was still playing. In my exhaustion, I turned to face it because I knew I'd be out again in a minute or two. I saw a guy without one of his legs walk across the screen. Next thing I know, smoke starts pouring out of the empty pant leg and the prisoners begin rioting. I had no idea what the fuck this movie was supposed to be, but that was my fault since I slept through it.

The asshole in me wanted to film it, send it to DeSean, and ask if he could do that. He'd find it funny, in a horrifically gross sorta way.

Excluding that one time because I was sick and miserable, I made sure to always be respectful of DeSean. He had to have his leg amputated when he was born. Never understood why and never had the courage to ask, though. I'd known him since we were in grade school and he was just one of the guys. I could tell he had a chip on his shoulder, though, and tried his best to be like the other guys. He made it to the Varsity team (after I told my Coaches I wouldn't play if he didn't get on), went to dinner with us after practice and midterms and finals, and even tried out for the school musical on a dare, but got rejected because he was more tone-deaf than anyone I've ever met in my life.

This was one of the cases where I felt a little bad for laughing "at" him and making him the butt of the joke. I felt bad about it for a long time and he didn't even know it happened.

I missed most of the movie because I was asleep for ninety percent of it and the parts I did see, I was too tired to remember, but that image was burned into my head. Of the guy missing the leg smoking out the courtyard of a prison camp. No matter what I tried, I always found myself remembering that smoky legless guy.

Victoria decided that we should match and chose purple as our color. She had already bought the dress months in advance and the idea came to her a couple weeks before the dance. I had a helluva time finding a purple suit on such short notice, but I felt like Saul Goodman when I showed up to her house wearing it. I even did the little finger gun thing.

“Holy shit,” Jasmine said from the couch. “You look like Prince.”

Probably the greatest compliment I have ever received in my entire life.

The three of us posed for pictures and our parents gushed over us for what seemed like an eternity. Jasmine’s family and Victoria’s family had been close for years so this was like the culmination of all their hard work. Seeing their girls in beautiful dresses before a big dance was a feeling I hoped I could have one day with my own kids.

After I got the customary “Touch My Daughter and I End You” conversation from Mr. Falco, who very much could kill me if he wanted but made it clear how much he respected me for sticking by her after what happened Sophomore year, I escorted the ladies to my car and we set off for the school. We talked about dresses from pictures that were already up on Instagram and made plans for the afterparties going on across town.

I was distracted during the whole thing, though. Probably missed a bunch of pics of some really cute girls. I had plans of my own for the dance.

## Ashley

Tonight was the night. My baby was all grown up and now everyone could enjoy it. After weeks of slaving over every little detail and decoration, Homecoming 2019 was officially underway. I was so proud. I had a glass of wine during lunch to celebrate all my hard work. And then another one before the girls came over to loosen me up a little.

Student Council was required to be at every dance to act as “chaperones for our classmates.” This translates to acting as free labor so the teachers who drew the short straws wouldn’t have to pay as much attention to us on what should have been their day off. We checked the tickets and made sure everyone was dressed “appropriately,” a ridiculous demand because it only leads to *us* telling girls in dresses up to their thighs to beat it and causing animosity. Why the adults couldn’t do this, I don’t understand.

I posted myself at the front table with Kate and Lauren while everyone else got comfortable in the gym. This was the first time I saw the basketball team that night.

They arrived as a pack, girlfriends and all, and walked into the gym together. I felt so fucking wrong for needing to tell DeSean that he had to have his pant leg pulled all the way down. He normally just folded it up on days when he wasn’t wearing his prosthetic. I think it was to show the world that he didn’t care what they thought and I respect the hell out of that. But our “dress code” said no shorts and I apologized profusely with O’Reilly hanging over my shoulder. DeSean understood and rolled it down before the rest of the team entered the school. I heard a lot of muttering and the whispers of duty jokes for me being an asshole picking on the amputee and I know I deserved exactly none of them.

Fuck O’Reilly.

The dance was slated to officially start ten minutes before O’Reilly and Mr. Hardy said we could go inside and they’d finish up. I thought they just planned on smoking and bullshitting the entire night, but I knew they’d be watching Spencer and Vinny like hawks.

I really didn’t *want* to be at a dance again after last year, but I needed to be there. Plus now that the girls knew my secret, I had this voice in the back of my mind telling me that I needed to be around them. Just in case they did what they do and blab about every single rumor and secret they have ever heard. I know they wouldn’t out me to anyone, but I still had that twang of anxiety plucking at my chest.

I saw everyone huddled together along the wall and went over to say hi.

## Lauren

Spencer, Frank, Casey, Heather, Tom, and I took a break from talking with everyone and really admired the gym. There's no way a high school dance can ever be like a nightclub or anything, but Ashley really gave it her all to make this place look good. Christmas lights, a red carpet for pictures, the stage done up like it was an award ceremony. She really took the Hollywood theme seriously. It looked incredible.

It still doesn't hold a candle to All Dogs Go to Heaven Under the Sea in Hawaii, though.

Ashley and Kate came over and joined us. I could tell Ashley was proud of what she had done on such a small budget. "It looks amazing in here," I said as the lights reflected off of her dress. She was glowing. Ashley smiled and thanked me, trying and failing to be as modest as possible. I knew she was happy. She deserved it.

"Beats the hell out of Prom," Frank said.

Ashley gave him a sharp jab to the stomach. He yelped like a small dog. "*Excuse me*," she snapped. "*I* helped design Prom. *You* probably don't remember how nice it was because you were totally shitfaced before you even got there!"

Frank recovered enough to speak. "That's not untrue, but in my defense—"

"Don't make me hit you again."

"Girls, girls! Don't fight!" Spencer said while stepping between them. "It's a beautiful dance! Let's go have some fun!"

"You know what, I just realized I forgot your dancing shoes in the trunk," Frank said.

"Cute." Spencer took my hand. "Wanna go get our picture taken on a *real* red carpet?" He turned and winked at her for setting up an actual red carpet in the gym.

I kissed him and smiled. "Totally." Everyone else gagged as we walked away. Spencer gave them the finger and we happily walked over to get in line behind all the other wannabe celebrity couples.

I knew I'd never walk the red carpet in my life so this was like a childhood dream come true. Ashley knew how much I wished I could be a singer, even though older me knows I have absolutely no chance of making it. I couldn't wait to see what she did with the next dance. Ashley had final say as head of the Homecoming Committee, which I figured I was going to have to start referring to as the Snowball Committee since that was the next dance on the list. Sadie Hawkins Committee is such a weird name. I decided I'd just officially change it to "Dance Committee" the next Student Council meeting we had.

I could do that now. I'm was President.

It was finally our turn. Spencer had his arm around my waist and I felt so confident and safe. While we waited for the photographer to get his equipment ready, I happened to glance over at the doors. It was one of those compulsory things where you see something move out of the corner of your eye and you can't help but look. I regretted it as soon as I did.

They entered like a pack of wolves. Watching. With all of the spotlights on us and my dress shining like a star, it only took Vinny a couple seconds to spot us. When he did, he smiled at me and I pretended to be looking at the camera. I wasn't fooling anyone.

"*Shiiiiiiit*," Spencer whispered into my hair. He saw the same thing I did. It's hard to miss the entire varsity basketball team entering a high school gym together.

"I saw."

After we got our pictures, which looked absolutely amazing by the way, we wandered over to the table. Frank was standing beside it, his face twisted into a sneer. When we got closer, he hurried over to speak his mind.

“What was that about?”

“I don’t know,” Spencer answered.

“Want me to take him outside?” Frank offered without a drop of humor.

“Frank, Jesus!”

“No!” Spencer announced. “No, no fighting, no... nothing. We’re trying to have a fun night. Just because he looked at me weird doesn’t mean you should go break his collarbone.”

Even though he wanted nothing more than to go over and bash Vinny’s skull in, he backed down. He wasn’t going to hurt his friendship with Spencer over some dumb rivalry. Even though he has a thousand faults, Frank is a good guy. He’s a good friend. I was glad Spencer had someone like him in his life. We may not be particularly close, but that could change. I *was* his best friend’s girlfriend now.

“Fine. But if he tries something, don’t blame me for finishing it.”

“You’re a real tough guy, you know that?” I said.

He finally chilled out enough to smile. Just a little bit. “What can I say? I’m told I’m a very passionate man.”

“By who?” I asked. “Your mother?”

“Cute. You wish she was here. She’s a better dancer than this idiot.”

“Why don’t you go find yourself a girl?” Spencer suggested. “Have some fun.”

“I’m gonna be spending the night lugging your ass around. I don’t have time for someone else.”

“Should I be worried something’s going on here?” I asked, smirking.

“Only if he finally says yes.” Frank winked at Spencer.

“Aww, well I apologize for ruining your night, but I’m kinda taken now.” I felt his hand start to inch down my dress. I didn’t try to move it away.

“Are you kidding? You finally made DumBell a thing!” He pointed across the gym. We followed his finger and, sure enough, Lonnie Dum and Sarah Bell were sitting together, smiling and laughing, completely detached from the rest of the world. They looked cute together. “We’ve been joking about them hooking up for three years now just for that dumb couple name.”

Ashley’s plan to pair the cheerleaders up with the jocks didn’t work as well as we would have liked. Half of them were rejected because the basketball guys realized what was going on and didn’t want to be a part of it and another quarter of them were already dating someone to begin with. I guess arranged marriages don’t exactly work in high school when the two parties actually have a say in whether they get together or not.

“Well, I’m very happy for them,” Spencer said. “They look nice together.”

“Oh, speaking of happy couples,” Frank went on. “Everyone is so glad to see you walking again, but maybe you should stay in the chair. Just for a bit longer. And really play up that sad little puppy dog look you get when you’re sad.”

Spencer laughed, extremely uncomfortably. “Uh... why?”

“To get the pity vote! You two hotties got a real chance at winning Homecoming King and Queen! Everybody I’ve talked to is saying they’re voting for you. Even the Freshmen who think I’m gonna kick their asses if they don’t.”

“*Are* you going to kick their asses if they don’t?” I asked.

Frank blinked. “No.”

As selfish as it might sound, the idea of becoming Homecoming Queen was all I could think about. Ever since the kiss, my Twitter and Facebook and Instagram were getting bombarded by people congratulating us and saying how great we look together. This was my first relationship where everyone knew who I was with so the social media storm kinda took me off guard, but I'd be lying if I said *nothing* was going to happen since we announced it in the most dramatic way possible. Not saying I regretted it or anything, though. That greedy little voice in my head was drinking in the praise we'd been getting over the past twenty-four hours.

Who better to win this with than the guy I was really starting to fall in love with?

Frank's eyes went as wide as dinner plates and his jaw fell to the floor. "Wow." was all he could say as he stared at something behind us. For the second time, we followed his eyes to the main doors. But this wasn't to admire two lovebirds who had no thoughts in their head except the joy they felt together. It was the exact opposite.

Besides the tux to get attention for me, she never dressed up. *Never*. If she were invited to the Met Gala or the Oscars, she'd probably try to show up in a plain blue shirt and jeans. I tried to bring her to a fancy restaurant after I won one of those charity raffle baskets at the school's summer fair last July. She said no because, and I quote, "There is no way I'm dressing up like I'm getting married just to eat a salad."

Something changed. And it was the most beautifully heartbreaking thing I'd ever seen in my life.

## Ashley

Seeing them kiss was weird. I wasn't jealous, but I wasn't happy either. I'm glad they are happy, but it didn't make *me* happy to see them together. Part of me will always love her. She was my first love and those are forever. And even though Spencer and I had become actual friends since we broke up from our sham of a relationship, I'd do anything to be in his place. She and I talked so much about this being our night last year.

They had my blessing. That's all I can really say. I snuck off to the kitchen to take a quick shot from a bottle of vodka I had hidden in the cupboard. I needed it.

Kate put her hand on my shoulder. "How're you holding up over this whole thing?"

I shrugged. "They're old enough to decide who they want to be with for themselves."

"Yeah, but how are you *feeling*?"

One of the reasons I never actually took my Mom up on her offer to get me into therapy was because I hate talking about myself. It seems so selfish to pay just to talk about your problems. I know that's kind of the entire point of therapy, but it still bothers me. Kate asking me if I was doing okay was one of those cases. Of course I wasn't okay. I wanted to rip my eyes out of their sockets and weep over driving a wedge between me and the love of my life.

But I was over it. I had to be. We've been over for months and she was happy now and I deserved to be happy, too.

"As happy as I'll ever be."

I sat alone at the table for a little while while the girls talked and got snacks and stuff. I needed some alone time. Probably should have gone out into the hallway for this, but I couldn't bring myself to leave. This dance was my baby.

Casey and Heather sat down on either side of me with bags of chips and pretzels and cans of coke. Even though we just ate about an hour ago, they tore through those things like starving dogs. I envied their ability to just eat and eat and never gain weight. I could feel myself putting on an extra pound or two since I quit cheerleading.

"You doing okay?" Casey asked.

"Yeah, you look upset," Heather observed.

"I'm okay. Just needed to sit down for a bit."

Even though they weren't exactly Rhodes Scholars, they had a nose for picking up on two things: fashion tips and relationship drama. They looked across the gym to see what I was staring at. It was incredibly obvious. Lauren and Spencer were in the spotlight, waiting for their couples picture on the mock red carpet I found at a thrift store one Saturday.

"You're still upset over the breakup, huh?" Casey quietly asked so no one else could hear.

I nodded, knowing they were probably connecting the dots.

"And it's not over Spencer. Is it?" Heather asked, matching Casey's volume.

I shook my head. Their faces fell. They really were taking learning that their best friend was gay extremely well. I always hoped they would, but I never wanted to find out. I guess things just find a way of solving themselves.

"Aww, Ash," Heather said as she reached over and held my hand. "I'm sorry things didn't work out. She's a really sweet girl."

Casey perked right up. "We should totally set you up tonight!"



Heather joined in her enthusiasm for fixing my ruined love life and said, “That’s a great idea! I’m sure we can find someone!”

How could I not smile at hearing their desire to pair me up with a pretty girl so I could be happy like everyone else?

Victoria walked past us to get to the snack table so I had to wait for her to leave. She waved to us and admired our dresses. She looked amazing in purple. I said hello and she complimented me on doing such a good job with the dance, which I found funny because she helped set things up before we left on Friday so it’s not like any of this was a surprise for her.

“That’s really sweet, guys,” I said as soon as Victoria was out of earshot, “but I’m trying to keep this on the down low for a while. Thank you, though.”

“Hey, no worries, I *completely* understand,” Casey said, Heather nodding in agreement. “But if you change your mind, we’re here for you!”

I gave both of their hands a squeeze and said with the utmost sincerity, “I love you girls.” They leaned over and hugged me as tight as they could. I was being crushed, but it was nice. This really was all I ever wanted. It made me regret not coming out when Michelle was alive. I wasted that chance and I realized I never wanted to do that again. It might have saved our friendship.

Kate walked up to us mid-hug. “Am I interrupting something?”

When they pulled away laughing, Casey’s eyes were drawn to the main doors and the laughter stopped. For once, she was speechless. Heather then looked over and her expression was the same. Wordless awe.

Kate did the same, but she actually had words for all three of them. “She looks amazing.”

I decided to see what they saw. Just like with Lauren and Spencer, it was incredibly obvious. She stood there in the most beautiful red dress I’d ever seen in my entire life. It was strapless and highlighted her form extremely well. She had her hair done with blonde highlights. I could even see the nails painted to match her dress. She was absolutely glowing as she passed by the spotlights we had pointed at the doors to give it an award show vibe.

Beth was practically a different person and she was absolutely beautiful.

“Yeah. She really does.”

“I’ve never seen her look so good!” Heather said.

“Me neither!” Casey said.

“We should invite her over,” Heather announced. She didn’t wait for anyone to agree with her. She just disappeared into the crowd of people and that was that.

Kate sat down in the seat beside me. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

I couldn’t look away from her. “Why would I?”

## Beth

She was the first person I saw when I entered the gym. She was always the first person I saw whenever I walked into a room. It was fate. I knew it was. We locked eyes. Only for a moment, though. The crowd on the “dance floor” was heavy. A few people walked in front of me and she was gone. What mattered was she knew I was here and I knew she could not take her eyes off of me while her little boyfriend had his meaty bear paws wrapped around her waist.

In just a few hours, we would be together back at my place. The way it was meant to be.

I felt a hand touch my bare shoulder. It was Heather. “Hey, Beth! You look, like, *totally amazing!* Do you wanna sit with us?” She pointed at her table. The shadowy figures of Casey, Katherine, and Ashley stared back at me, their smiles inviting.

Considering I had the entire night to win her back, I figured I could afford to sit for a little bit. The heels were absolutely killing me. I said yes and she led me back to her little band of friends.

I couldn’t even sit down before I was bombarded by compliments and questions from Casey and Heather.

“You look amazing!” “Where’d you get the dress?!” “How much was it?” “You gotta tell me where you got your hair done!” “Blonde totally suits you!”

I answered the simple questions with simple responses. “Found it pretty cheap online. This hairdresser downtown my aunt knows. She said blonde worked best with my eyes.”

They all agreed that I looked amazing. They were not wrong. Even Kate— who deep down I knew quietly hated my guts— could not help but say that I looked very pretty. “Thanks, Kate. You all look great. Really.” I made sure to focus on Ashley, who had been staring at me wordlessly since I began walking over to their table and answering their barrage of questions and compliments. “You, too, Ash. You look beautiful.”

Ashley smirked a little, finally breaking her awed stare. “You don’t look so bad yourself.”

“Oh, um...” Kate began, unsure of how to continue. “Hey, look, Beth... we’re sorry about the game...”

I had no idea what she was referring to at first. When the realization hit me, I almost threw up. How could they talk so openly about this around Casey and Heather? Before I could stand up and run away to have a panic attack, Ashley spoke up, seemingly sensing my fear.

“Hey, don’t freak out,” she said. “I told them everything. *We* did, I mean.”

“About what?” I asked, a little too defensively. I could still deny it if they suspected something.

“About me,” Ashley said quietly. “And Lauren.”

Out of all the things to come out of that night, I never expected Ashley Williams to be one of them. She was always so paranoid about how people would react to people knowing her deepest secret. Lauren told me as much on the rare occasion we discussed their relationship. About Ash’s grandmother and the sway she still held over Ash’s mom. Whenever it came up, it was usually an attempt at humanizing Ashley for me to make me understand why she could be so cruel and do such horrible things. It rarely worked. Never, if I am being completely honest. I never understood why she insisted on defending her so much after the breakup, and justifying her ex’s shitty behavior.

Learning she had the gall to come out to her best friends did more to humanize her for me than anything else before.

Apparently they had not informed Heather because she needed a moment to process this information. “Holy shit. Wait, are you—”

If there was ever anyone I wanted to come out to, I did not expect it to be Heather Sinclair. She had a mouth as loose as the floorboards in the Home Alone 2 house. Yet here I was, faced with either lying and being made to look like an idiot for doing so or facing the music and finally admitting that Bethany Hill is gay.

And so I did.

“And that means you and Lauren...” Casey said, picking up the pieces. I nodded. “Shit. I am so behind on this stuff. I’m usually so good about knowing these things.”

Even though she could be thick as cold soup, I found her to be quite endearing. Maybe it was because I was so elated to see Lauren in her dress. Maybe it was because I was just happy to be among people who accepted me for who I was. Maybe it was because Ashley had this sparkle in her eyes when she looked at me that made me actually feel pretty. Or maybe it was because I hadn’t let my hair down in months. But I needed this. I needed to laugh. To be happy. I missed this so much. We all laughed. I even snorted a little, which made them laugh harder, which made me laugh harder, too.

It was nice.

## Vinny

We live in an age of school shootings and bomb threats happening every other week. Our school was one of the largest in the entire state. Security was their top concern. On paper, anyway. We'd pass through the metal detectors every day before school and needed to get our bags checked. It's just the way it is in our fair country and it absolutely sucks ass.

So we had to get creative.

If we wanted to show Spencer what's what, we needed to get something special inside the school. Something that wouldn't set off metal detectors or, if it did, could be explained away when the security guard pats us down. His name was Jake. He was a cool guy. Just doing his job. He once caught me and Victoria making out in one of the chemistry labs and let us off with a warning, but gave me a thumbs up the next time we shared eye contact. He's just cool like that.

"Have a good night, guys," he said after giving Lonnie a wave with the wand. Most of the girls had already run inside to say hi to their friends. "Just do me a favor and don't let me catch you screwing around with your dates in the classrooms. I'll have to kick you out if you do that."

"We'll be good," I promised. I fully intended to spend some quality time with Victoria later, but it wouldn't be here. I had things to do in the meantime.

Victoria waited for me outside of the gym. She never looked more beautiful in her entire life. Purple never looked better than when it was on her. She was like a Byzantine princess or something. I let myself get sidetracked for a minute just to kiss her over and over and over again. The guys were *ooohing* and *awwing* and she broke away laughing. Sometimes I hated those guys.

Beth approached us and gave me and Victoria a wave. I'm used to seeing her as this little mousey thing who didn't care about her appearance. She actually looked really hot after she put a little work into herself and ditched the baggy long sleeve t-shirts and put her hair up. Like somehow she was almost as hot as Victoria. Victoria seemed happy to see her. She never spoke about being friends with her or anything, but Beth seemed to enjoy Victoria gushing over her dress.

"You clean up well," was all I could say. I wasn't going to say that I thought she looked hot in front of my girlfriend. I'm not that much of an idiot. If we weren't dating, I'd absolutely hit on her.

"I try."

"I'll see you inside," Victoria said cheerfully. Beth smiled at her and walked to drop something off in her locker. I gave her a second before deciding it was time for us to make our entrance. Didn't want anyone to think we were all together or anything.

We entered the gym as a pack of wolves, ready to go for the kill. It may have looked a little conspicuous, but we didn't care. We were a team and we all cared for each other like brothers, dumb as they may be sometimes. Victoria held my hand tight as we surveyed the gym. Ashley did a pretty good job. The lights were nice. It wasn't a New York nightclub or anything, but it was nice.

Lauren stared at me from the red carpet setup. It wasn't to admire my tux, though. I smiled back at her. He totally saw me do it, but I didn't care. He knew I hated him and I wasn't going to let him get away with this bullshit. I don't know what Beth has against him, but I'm glad she trusts me enough to tell me how much of a snake he is. I thought she would be all for it since her and Lauren are like best friends. I guess she must really hate the idea of them dating.

"Come on," Victoria said, giving my arm a tug. "Let's go dance."

I gave her another kiss. "Okay."

The guys split up into small groups with their dates. Lonnie was already halfway across the floor with Sarah Bell when I tried to get his attention. I'm glad he finally got with her. He'd been crushing on her for ages.

Before I went off to dance with Victoria, I looked back at DeSean. He gave me a nod and sat down at a table in the corner. He didn't want to come at all. He thought this was insane. I'm glad he came. We needed him. There was no way this would work without him.

## Spencer

This was supposed to be our night. We talked about this for days now. How happy we'd be when we finally got to let everyone know we were dating. This was my first *real* relationship. Ashley and I were only together because people forced us to be together. The price of popularity or whatever. She never loved me. Not really. But me and Lauren? This was *real*.

Or at least I thought it was.

We were so in sync before Beth showed up. She couldn't keep her eyes or hands off of me and the feeling was mutual. But then Beth showed up in that dress and her hair dyed blonde and Lauren couldn't stop staring at her. Even when she thought I wasn't looking or we were talking to different people, I'd glance over and see her straining her neck while trying to see what she was doing.

My biggest fear was the thought that we were just rushing into this. She had only barely just broken up with Beth when we first hooked up. She never had time to actually get over her. I don't know if she was mad at her or what, but she clearly still loved her. We might be together, but I knew she wished she was sitting at that table. Maybe I was just overthinking things.

Was this relationship a mistake? Maybe. I don't know. We were both lonely and there for each other at the time. Now I felt like we are as far apart as we could be and she was sitting right next to me.

## Ashley

She was really shy at first, but seeing her come out of her shell was astounding. She was a completely different person than the girl I terrorized for over a year. The four of us talked about TV and our favorite foods and gossip and when the music changed, we went into massive rants about which bands we liked and which singers we hated and stupid TikTok dance trends.

Casey came and went whenever Tom wanted to dance. Heather played on her phone when the conversation shifted from a group effort to just me and her and Kate. I was really glad I didn't end up with a date. It was nice to just hang out and enjoy myself with my friends for a change.

And whatever me and Beth were, I was really glad it was a thing at all.

"Did either of you study for that English test on Monday?" she asked.

I groaned. "Please, God, don't talk about school right now."

Kate blinked. "We're in a school, Ash."

"Oh, you know what I mean." They smiled. "So what are we doing tomorrow?"

Casey and Heather shrugged. "Probably just hang out at my place after the party." "I need to drive my sister to basketball practice. Maybe pick up lunch after?" "Ohhh, okay yeah, let's get lunch."

"Want to come over to my place?" I offered. It was a general offer to anyone at the table.

"Yeah totally!" "Yeah, sure."

"Just give me a time and I'll ask my Mom for a ride," Kate said with a smile.

"I can drive you, if you want," I said. "You only live a few minutes away, it's no big deal." Then I looked at her. I barely ever took my eyes off of her since she sat down. "Do you want to come over? Hang out with us?"

She looked surprised. I was surprised when she said, "Is that okay with you guys?"

"Yeah, absolutely!" "Yes! Come over and show us where you got that dress from!"

It was decided. Beth would be hanging out with us. I was really excited. Maybe it would give me a chance to patch things up. Tonight was just the start. Maybe it was just because I was kinda tipsy from pregaming, but I wanted to make things right. I wanted to repay her for what happened. She's a beautiful girl and she was there when no one else was. I was going to find a way to repay her for that.

## Kate

Ashley is my friend. She was one of the first people around here to actually give a shit about me. We might have only started talking because bad things happened to us and we needed someone to open up to about it about a month earlier, but she may be the closest friend I had at that entire school.

I was so proud of her for actually coming out. That took so much strength and I have never been more happy to be her friend. I felt like shit for kinda forcing Beth to out herself, but Beth seemed to be taking it well. Shockingly well, really.

I wondered when Lauren would finally have the courage to come out. Maybe the three of them could join the LGBT Club together. If they could get over whatever problems they were all having, anyway. That'd be really cool to see the Student Council President be an actual member and not just make the one required visit to show "solidarity" or whatever. Student Council had to meet with them once in November to take pictures for the newspaper and then we never had to interact with them again.

Things could be different around the school and I wanted to help make that happen. Whatever it took.



## Vinny

We didn't have an exact timetable for when we were going to do it, but we knew it would be fairly soon. Beth said she would text me when she was ready for it to go down, but she still hadn't gotten back to me yet so we were stuck in limbo, growing more and more anxious as time went by. We didn't want to drag this out longer than we had to and risk something going wrong. So we said we'd hang out and party a little. As much as someone can "party" at a high school dance, I mean.

Alex was staring at Beth when I found him after taking a quick bathroom break. "You might wanna pick your jaw up off the floor."

"Can you blame me?" he asked. I gotta admit, I couldn't. Victoria would kill me for thinking it, but goddamn. "When do you wanna do it?"

"Relax. We just got here. Besides..." I pointed to Lonnie and Sarah dancing. "We owe it to our buddy to have a little fun."

DeSean frowned. "Fine. But please, hurry. I don't like this."

An hour seemed to pass by in just a few seconds. We were having the time of our lives. Victoria was grinding up against me during the fast songs and pressing her forehead against my chest during the slow ones. Lonnie and Sarah had barely left their table, but they had the biggest, dorkiest smiles on their faces.

When the song ended and some really slow song that wasn't romantic in the slightest came on. That was when I knew it was time. Victoria told me, and I quote, "God, I hate this song." and left to go talk to her friends. I planned on texting her once we got to the bathroom so I could have some sense of plausible deniability when O'Reilly inevitably tried to blame me and the guys for what was going to happen. With good reason, but it's still extremely offensive he was just going to assume we did something bad.

"Lonnie! Let's go!"

Lonnie was cuddled up with Sarah and looked genuinely sad that he had to go. He gave her a quick kiss and left with that same grin from earlier. I think it was his first. They were both blushing like idiots.

Hardy and O'Reilly stepped in front of us as we were leaving. "And where are you boys going?" O'Reilly asked with arms crossed. I bet they thought they looked really tough.

"Bathroom," I answered. "Take a break."

He gave each of us a once-over. Considering there were around five of us, it took an awkward amount of time. "All of you? What are you? Women?"

"I think that's illegal to ask. Sir."

He didn't like that one. "Why do you need to all go together? Hiding something?"

"Is there a rule against taking a break from dancing? It's getting kinda hot in here. We don't want to pass out from heat exhaustion." I pointed to Beth and Lauren, who left the gym at around the same time. I considered chasing after Beth once this was over, but I had no idea how to get rid of the guys following me. They didn't need to know who I was working with. "Those two are friends. Are they allowed to go out together or are they going to get a talking to when they come back?"

Mr. Hardy stepped in. "Alright, alright, go on. Don't be in the halls too long, though."

"Thank you. We won't be."

I held my disdain as best as I could as we walked past them. God, I hated O'Reilly. He's just such a smug asshole and just loved rubbing in that we had absolutely no power until after we graduated and

could only see him as an equal when we were both standing in line at the store ten years later. What does he have to be so proud about? Like, dude, you're a Principal at the high school you went to when you were my age. It's been... what? Thirty years. Grow up.

## Beth

"That song was horrible," I said.

"Whoever said that should be played should get their ears checked," Heather said.

"Wretched," Casey said.

"So bad," Kate added."

Ashley grinned. "I love it!"

We all began laughing as we walked back to our seats. My ears were ringing from the music. The stereo system around here is insanely powerful for a high school gym. If this is what a nightclub is like, I couldn't wait to turn twenty-one.

We were about to sit back down when it came on.

Celine Dion and Andrea Bocelli's iconic duet. "The Prayer."

I hadn't heard this song in months. It was the song that began playing on Lauren's playlist after we got home from the date where we ended up having sex for the first time. My heart began to break all over again. It was the most romantic song I'd ever heard in my life. It became *our* song overnight. My eyes couldn't help but wander over to Lauren and Spencer. I think she had the same thoughts I did because she quickly hurried out into the hallways. I could tell she was sad. It was time.

"You know what," I said suddenly, "I'll be back in a second. I really gotta pee. I'll find you guys."

"Yeah sure," Ash said. I couldn't tell if she knew something was wrong. "We'll be here."

I nodded my head and ran off. Casey made sure to yell out, "Don't fall in!" As I went. It made me smile a little bit despite everything going on in my head.

I had to push through the crowd of basketball players crowding the doors just so I could get out. I didn't care what they were doing there. I cared that I nearly lost Lauren in the halls. She went to the nearest bathroom and I hurried after her, only stopping at the door so she could have some privacy and not think I was following her.

Because I obviously wasn't.

After about a minute, I pulled out my little purse and went inside to "reapply makeup." I can't believe how often some girls had to do this just to keep themselves looking presentable. I swore I wasn't going to go overboard tonight and I kept that promise, but a little extra lipstick didn't exactly hurt.

*If Grace could see me now, she'd have...*

The bathroom stall opened and Lauren and I stared at each other in the reflections of the mirror. I pressed my lips together to try and play it cool and said, "Hey."

"Hey."

"Sorry, I should..." I quickly packed up my things and began to leave.

"No, wait," she blurted out. "Stay. We should talk. Please?"

"Okay."

"I'm sorry. This wasn't fair to you. I should have told you were dating now and—"

"Lauren, wait."

"What?"

I stepped forward and held her hands tight. "I understand. You're happy now. I'm happy for you. And I'm sorry for whatever happened that drove us apart."

Lauren gave my hands a squeeze. "Me, too." You looked me over. I never felt sexier in my entire life. "You look amazing."

"I look amazing? Have you looked in a mirror lately?" She laughed. "Seriously, if that's what you did for Homecoming, I can't wait to see you at Prom."

*You and I are gonna be Prom Queens together and we'll go to college together and get married and spend the rest of our lives together. Every pain we've ever suffered will be worth it when I get to say "I do." to you. I promise.*

"That's so far away, I'm not even thinking about it right now."

*Nothing can ever come between us. Spencer is just a phase. You know I'm right for you. We're meant to be together. We both know it. I won't lose you again. I can't lose you again.*

"It'll be here sooner than you think. And Ash did a great job out there. I bet she's gonna absolutely kill Prom."

"Oh, she killed it out there."

I smiled. "She looks really pretty."

"She does, doesn't she."

"Not as pretty as us, though. Especially you."

I figured this was the one and only chance to try to win her back. Remind her of the happy days and see if she was ever going to give me another chance. It wasn't to try and ruin Spencer's life or anything. I just didn't want to go the rest of my life wondering what if I hadn't made a move. And if she said no, so be it. I was happy for her. I could call things off with Vinny and we'd go about our night as if nothing happened. Either way, she would be happy. And I would be, too.

"So did you hear what they were playing?" I asked.

"Hmm?"

"They were playing our song."

I still remember getting goosebumps the first time she saw me without a shirt on. Her kisses were like electricity. Like fireworks. She just had a way of just looking at you and making you feel like the sexiest human being alive.

It was the happiest I'd ever been in my life. Obviously I knew I wasn't her first and I was really clumsy and awkward cause me and Grace didn't do a whole lot when we were together— and to be honest that scared the shit out of me since I knew Lauren had done this a lot before— but she had a way of making me feel like I was a goddess and the most beautiful girl in the world.

"What do you mean?"

"The song. Back in the gym. The Prayer. Celine Dion. It was just playing."

"Sorry, I don't remember it."

## Lauren

I kissed Spencer a little too much and had to come up for air. Even though we were sitting down, I felt dizzy. I didn't care if people were staring. "Tonight is amazing."

He gave me a peck on the nose. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

We kissed and kissed and kissed again.

"Okay. I need a breather. I'll be back in a few."

"Aww but this song sounds so romantic." He brushed his hand across my knee and I shivered. "One more dance?"

"There'll be other songs." He pouted. "Oh, don't be a baby. Wait for me?"

"I'll try." He winked.

I wanted to tease the shit out of him before we got back to his place. He was absolutely loving this and I was absolutely loving him. But I did need to pee and get something to drink so I let him have some time to cool off. We had all night ahead of us and who knows how long after that. Why rush when you can savor every minute of it?

## Beth

My life is a lie. She never loved me. It was all an act. A great big joke. She used me to get over Ashley. I was nothing to her. Just a piece of meat she could cry to and fuck when she got lonely and sad. None of it was real. The song, our relationship. Everything.

Was every single thing I ever cared about fake? Did she ever even love me?

“Could you just do me one favor?” I asked.

“Anything.”

“Look, um... God, it sounds really stupid. So when I was getting ready, I found a pile of old homework and stuff and it turns out I still have one of Spencer’s books from when he was in the hospital and I just kinda forgot to give it back. Can you give me his locker combo so I can put it away?”

“Oh! Okay, sure. I think it’s 17-25-9.”

“Thank you.” She began washing her hands as I stood in the doorway and gave her one last look. “Goodbye, Lauren.”

“See ya.”

She smiled. I did not.

After that, I wandered around the school with no destination in mind. My brain was shut off and I had no thoughts, no feelings. Except regret. And rage. For wasting so long on someone who will never love me back. Someone who used me. I will never be enough for anyone and everyone I love goes away.

So I walked and walked until I got to the steps. They had the only doors that weren’t locked in the entire school so I began to climb. When I got to the top, I looked over the railing. It was a short drop, but I might have been able to break my neck if I landed just right. I would have needed to be perfectly aligned or else I would only succeed in wounding myself and would be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of my life. Or worse.

The worst thing I can lose control of is my body and mind. It is my greatest fear. People laugh when I say I am not interested in drinking or getting high. I tried to drink before. I hated the sensation of being drunk. Grace loved to smoke and the contact high always made me paranoid. Feeling out of control of my actions was terrifying. I could never imagine what doing something like ecstasy or heroin or painkillers would be like and had no intention of finding out. My other greatest fear is surgery. If I am going to die, I want it to be on my terms. Going out while asleep on a table during a medical procedure is the most pathetic and meaningless way to die. My mother might collect a sizable wrongful death lawsuit settlement, but my life would have no meaning. I’d be nothing more than a statistic.

So instead of jumping and risking lifelong disability payments, I resigned myself to sit a few steps down, the burner phone held tight in my hand. The steps chilled my legs. How did other girls enjoy wearing these things?

I really was not sure if I would go through with this after all the fun I had during the dance, but now I know I have no other choice. This was inevitable. Spencer had to go down. I searched for the single contact I had saved on the phone and gave it a quick text.

*17-25-9.*

I heard someone clear their throat at the base of the steps and thought I was going to have a heart attack.

## Vinny

We were wandering around the hallway when I got the text. The number was unknown and the message read three numbers. I knew it was Beth.

“17-25-9,” I recited.

Alex put on a pair of latex gloves and stretched out his fingers. We joked about this being like Mission: Impossible or something. He really warmed up to this idea, all things considered. I was really nervous about including Alex in this since he and Beth work together on Student Council, but he was cool with this. More than cool, honestly. He didn’t give a shit about this warning O’Reilly put out. He was my friend and he had my back.

“If you think I’m gonna let Spencer threaten you— threaten *us* — then you’re insane,” he said. “Fuck him.”

Alex entered the code into the locker while we gathered around. Lonnie was the lookout. When the locker finally opened, we saw the mess inside. Papers wrinkled up and crushed underneath books and half-empty bags of chips and cans of coke. There was no rhyme or reason to his organizational system. He was a pig.

“Jesus,” DeSean muttered.

“Alright, let’s go.”

Everyone formed a wall around DeSean as he rolled up his pant leg. On occasions he was not wearing his prosthetic, he made sure to pull the leg down so people didn’t stare. We were used to it by now, but I figure he still got self-conscious. Today wasn’t because he was self-conscious, though. Ashley looked like a massive bitch when she told him he had to pull his pant leg down. It unintentionally did us a favor. He reached up inside and ripped the brown paper bag that was taped to him clean off, wincing from the hairs the tape were stuck to.

I took the bag and shoved it deep inside the mess. It had to make sure it looked legit so when the cop came around, it didn’t look too conspicuous. The fact that his locker looked like New Orleans after Katrina hit made it much easier to hide. Just enough that stood out.

“Alright, get the lighter and let’s go!” I shut the locker and locked it while the rest of the guys hurried back to the gym.

## Kate

I was more than happy to sit and talk with Casey and Heather. They were really sweet. They talked non-stop about fashion tips and gossip. They only got interrupted when Tom came over and stole Casey away for a dance every so often. But Ashley spent all night glancing over at either Lauren or Beth. I had that funny feeling in my stomach that I got when I knew something bad was going to happen.

Lauren walked in a couple minutes after she left, but Beth never came back. Ashley was the first one to notice and actually say something. "Beth's been gone for a while," Ashley said, glancing back over to the gym door for the fifth time in two minutes. "Do you think she's okay?"

"I'm sure she's fine," I said.

She gave one last look before standing up. "I'm gonna go check on her." She left before I could try to stop her. I sighed as I watched her go.

"Wait, are they a thing now?" Heather asked.

This was literally my biggest fear. Her saying it made me feel sick. "I seriously doubt it," I said, hoping and praying.

"It's so hard to keep this stuff straight anymore," Casey said. She turned to Heather. "Ha. Get it? Cause she's... no?" She looked away and coughed when nobody laughed. I thought it was kinda funny.

"Who are you dating again?" Heather asked me.

I blushed. Hard. Not that I had anything to be embarrassed about. Obviously. Being single is... awesome. "Um... nobody."

Casey shook her head. "That won't do. We're gonna hook you up at the party tonight."

"No, Casey, Seriously, it's—"

"Uh, hello. You're one of our friends now," Heather said. "You can have any guy you want. Just say who and we'll make it happen."

"Have you ever had a boyfriend?" Casey asked. "I don't remember anyone ever say they dated you."

"Nope. No boyfriends."

"Is there a someone special in mind?" Heather asked.

Yes. "No. Not really."

"Okay so what exactly are you looking for right now?" Casey asked.

"Um... I mean, someone who's nice to be would be... nice..."

Heather snickered. "Kate, she's asking if you want to fuck somebody tonight."

Every muscle in my body tensed up. That was the last thing on my mind. Why does everybody make sex like it's the ultimate goal? I just wanted to meet somebody. Maybe get a date for next weekend. I don't want to hook up with a total stranger.

"Um. No thank you."

"What about Theo?" Casey asked.

"Who?"

"Ughhh," Heather groaned. "*Please* not *him*. Candice said she was over his house to hang out with Jenny and he was a total weirdo the whole time."

"What? Like a creep weirdo who was trying to flirt with her?"

"No, like he was talking to himself in his room and listening to really loud anime and Candice said it sounded like some weird porn or something."

"What the fuck?"



"I know right?"

"She could meet Terrance? He's supposed to be at Elena's house for the party tonight."

"I heard he was trying to date Sabrina."

"Wait, shut up, no he isn't. Sabrina said she was waiting to go out with Jack."

"Jack's *never* breaking up with Mary."

"Sorry, who's Mary again?" I asked. "And Jack?"

"Oh, right, sorry," Heather said with a laugh. "Mary is on the squad, Jack is her boyfriend, and Terrance is this guy from East High who totally hooked up with Kylie last year but she would *never* admit it because Kara had a rule about dating guys from outside the school."

"That was a rule?"

"Elena said her boyfriend went to Hilltop and Kara went *ballistic* on her. Nobody ever even got to meet the guy because Kara forced her to break up with him over the phone after practice one day."

I scowled. "What a bitch."

"You're telling us." "We had to cheer with her for two years." "You ever fantasize about pushing someone in front of a train?" "I mean, yeah but, like, legally."

Thankfully for me, the topic of the legality of pushing someone in front of a train distracted them from discussing which boy was worthy of taking my virginity. It was the last thing I wanted to talk about so I welcomed the chance to distract them with my knowledge of justifiable homicide. Being a future lawyer and the daughter of two of them has its perks. I figure anyone who would kick the shit out of Kara Alderman deserved to know their rights on just how far they could go with it.

## Ashley

I knew she was chasing after Lauren. She left right after Lauren did. And I knew that Lauren and Spencer were really close. Just look at them for five seconds. Anyone can see those two are falling in love. If Beth tried to win her back, she was going to get hurt. When she didn't come back after being gone for, like, ten minutes, I knew I had to go find her. She was going to need somebody.

The hallways weren't exactly empty, but they weren't letting people cluster up together. The most people I saw together were a couple of the basketball guys just wandering around near the guys' bathroom. They didn't want to talk to me, I didn't want to talk to them.

I went to the closest girls' bathroom, but she wasn't inside. As I wandered the halls, I couldn't find Beth. Instead, I found Lauren picking a sweater up from inside her locker.

"Oh, hey, Ash," she said as she shut her locker. "Your dress is really beautiful."

I hoped she would like it. I got it for her.

"Thanks, Lauren. Yours is, too."

"Have you seen Beth?" I asked. "She seemed upset."

"Really?" she asked. "I just talked to her in the bathroom and she seemed okay? She said something about Spencer's locker. I guess she had one of his books or something, I don't know."

I thanked her and gave her one last look. She was so beautiful. I couldn't help but imagine what could have been if I weren't such a pathetic waste of life who ruined everything I touched. I just came out to my friends. That could have been us. We could have won Queen together. What If's are a bitch.

I tried looking for her at Spencer's locker, but she wasn't there. Just Vinny and a couple of the basketball guys standing around. I considered any of the places she might be hiding out in. The locker room, the cafeteria, the Student Council office. But all of those were locked up to keep us from sneaking into them to make out or whatever.

So I went to the stairs. They were my go-to place to hide when I was feeling sad and had no other place to hide out. And sure enough, there she was. She didn't hear me coming so I cleared my throat. I made a habit of doing that whenever I did things like walk down an aisle at a store or entered a classroom with only one person in it.

Beth gasped and nearly flew like an eagle. "Shit! Please don't scare me like that."

"Sorry! I'm sorry!" I stammered.

She needed a second to catch her breath. "No... Sorry, it's okay. I'm sorry. I didn't think anyone would be here. Shit..."

*Already off to a great start...* "Can I sit with you?" She nodded and I sat down, making sure we had enough space so it wouldn't be weird. "Look, I know I'm probably the last person you want to talk to right now, and you can tell me to leave whenever you want and I promise I will... but if you need someone to talk to right now..."

She buried her phone in her purse, but never let up her grip on it. It must have been a sort of stress ball for her. She never even made eye contact with me after I snuck up on her. So we sat in silence while I wondered if I made a mistake by trying to seek her out.

"You know, I finally understand how you feel," she finally said.

"Huh?"

"You spent months regretting how things went down with Lauren. One little mistake and she was just... gone... And, of course, I thought you were an idiot for it because I'm a total bitch. I wondered why you didn't just accept that it was your fault that she was gone and move on so me and her could be happy

and she could get over the guilt of leaving you when you were vulnerable. You know how terrible she felt about that? She hated herself for so long and I tried to be there for her. And now that it's happened to me... I think I get it. Kind of.

"I thought I knew what losing someone was like when Grace died, but I didn't have any say in that. There was nothing I could've done anyway. I thought I could have done more or said something and that would have magically fixed things and she would have been okay. But she was just gone one day and I had no closure. And that was like having no closure in a weird way. There was no point in regretting anything because I can't do anything about it now. She's dead and I'm alive. I hated her so fucking bad for leaving me like that. And then I hated myself even more for blaming her. I felt so terrible for ever letting that thought into my head.

"But this time is different. Lauren's still alive, too, and I have to see her every day. I know I could have fixed this if I hadn't been such a massive asshole all the time. To you, especially. I know that was a big reason why she left me. Because I just couldn't get over the fact that she still loved you and even though she was committed to me, she would always be thinking of you."

She laughed and rubbed her eyes. Through the moonlight creeping in from the window, I could just barely see them glistening with tears, but she still wanted to speak and I wouldn't dare break her train of thought. She needed to let it all out.

"And now she's dating *your* ex. Isn't that hilarious? Our ex swooped in and picked up Spencer as soon as he was available and now we're standing around with our dicks and our hands. Life is... really fucking funny. Isn't it?"

"She still loves you, you know," I said softly. "She probably always will. You meant the world to her."

"Key word is *meant*," she said while making no attempt to hide her bitterness. "I..." She sighed. "I ruined it. She will never love me again and I can't help but feel like I made it all up in my head. I don't know if it was even... *real*... She doesn't even remember our song..."

"Your song?"

"Back in the gym," she said. "The Prayer. It played when we..." She cleared her throat and turned away so she could wipe her eyes and pretend I wasn't there.

"Did she know it was actually *your song*?"

She shrugged the question off. "It doesn't matter now."

We sat in silence some more. I really didn't know what to say. Since she moved to Arlington, we only had two serious conversations. This and her talking me off the ledge. We never actually spoke one-on-one before this. Part of me knew I had no place to give her advice. I helped Kara bully Grace and I will always hold a part of myself responsible for driving her to kill herself. It's one of those things I think about when I try to sleep at night.

"Do you think it's too late for me?" she suddenly asked, finally looking at me. I became lost in her soft brown eyes, reddened and bloodshot from crying. She had deep purple streaks under her eyes. I wondered when she last slept.

"What?"

"Am I always going to be this awful, vindictive cunt who treats everyone around me like shit? Am-am I just trapped in this cycle of hating myself and hating the world and hating myself for hating the world for making me hate myself?"

"Beth, come on—"

She started speaking at a hundred words a second. It was hard to keep track.

“Ever since Grace left, I’ve been imploding. I mean, I-I just know it. I feel so bitter at everyone who’s still alive and think I’m better than everyone else even though I know I’m just a piece of shit that nobody likes and now Lauren’s gone and I feel like I’m never going to be happy again and I’m just trapped inside my own body with no way out and...” She began to hyperventilate. “Fuck fuck fuckfuckfuck I can’t breathe I can’t breathe ohshitohshitohshit—”

She began looking around frantically. I don’t know what for, but she couldn’t sit still, her eyes darting across the hallway for anything to latch onto. I’d had my fair share of anxiety attacks so I knew exactly what to do for her.

“Hey, hey, hey, listen to me,” I said, softly but sternly enough that she would pay attention. “Look at me.” She finally steadied her vision and focused on me, though her pupils were bouncing around as she tried to calm herself down. “You’re going to be okay. You just got yourself a little worked up. But you’re gonna be okay. Look around the hallway and tell me what you see. Any little thing there is, say it out loud. And focus on your breathing, alright? Follow me. In... and out... in... and out...”

It was weird being on the other end of one. It was honestly kinda terrifying. If I didn’t have some experience, I doubt I could have managed. I guess my awful genetics and rollercoaster of a mental state actually came through for me for once in my life.

It took her a little bit to regain control of her body. When she finally began breathing again, she burst out into tears and held onto me like I was going to fly away if she didn’t. She was quite strong for someone her size. I held her back and whispered in her ear.

“You’re gonna be okay. I’m here for you. I promise.”

I closed my eyes and let her cry. She smelled like lavender.

## Vinny

The one weakness the school has in their little security system is its back door that leads down to the field and the field house. It doesn't have an alarm and the only cameras around it are never reviewed unless something bad happens. Why? Fuck if I know. Budget cuts? With hundreds of people wandering around campus before the dance started, it was so easy for Lonnie to wander off with a backpack holding our little secret weapon. It was even easier for Alex, who was on Student Council and had access to all the hallways and stairways before they got locked up for the night, to wander off from the gym and pick up that backpack before he was missed.

After we planted the bag in the locker, we hurried back to Alex's extra locker he kept on the other side of the school. He made absolutely sure it wasn't going to be locked up or else we'd be screwed. I figured we had a couple minutes before O'Reilly got suspicious. We already wasted so much time waiting for Beth to send me the locker combination. That was the entree in this plan. This was the dessert.

Alex unlocked the lock and quickly pulled the bag out. There was another bathroom right across the way, hence why he stole this locker to begin with, so we ran inside.

The device was simple. Primitive. Somebody took a big tin coffee can from their pantry, emptied it out, and brought it to Lonnie's house. The real trick was finding enough ping pong balls for it to work. The movie called for a few thousand. So we spent all Saturday morning scouring every single retail store in the city for them. Target, Walmart, Dick's. If it had a sporting goods section, we bought them out. In the end, we had hundreds of the little bastards. Not to mention all the matches we needed. It cost us a few hundred bucks, but we all knew it was worth it. Finding the fuse wire was harder, but I guess Alex had an uncle who just had some lying around. He was a real Ted Kaczynski type.

Lonnie may be a bit of a meathead, but he was surprisingly good at science and chemistry. He ended up tutoring half the team whenever they ended up failing the class. We called him Heisenberg. He was the one who took it upon himself to grind the ping-pong balls down to a fine powder and cut the heads off the matches, cover the inside of the tin with aluminum foil, and assemble the bomb. DeSean had an antique coffee grinder in his basement that we gave Lonnie to make the powder. I felt bad for basically ruining the thing.

DeSean looked really nervous when I helped strap the can on. The movie made it so simple because the guy got it amputated above his knee. DeSean made a joke about me buying him a drink first before I started touching his leg. It cut the tension a little, thank God. The way it was dropped in the movie was the guy released a string that undid the knot holding it against his leg. I think they did this with the dirt they collected in *The Great Escape*, too. DeSean would just have to hold the string and pray it dropped before the fuse caught his pants on fire.

"How're you feeling, buddy?" I asked as I guided the strings up through his pant leg. He took them off and leaned against the wall while we worked. A couple of the guys helped keep him steady for me.

"Seeing as I have some experience smuggling drugs now, this is nothing" he said. I could tell he was extremely nervous. I felt horrible for putting him in this situation, but we needed to send a message here.

"That's the spirit."

When the strings went through and I did a couple checks to be sure it would hold up, DeSean put his pants back on and guided the strings through his shirt and into his sleeves. You become an expert at

sneaking earbuds through our shirts when you have to endure Calculus so this was basically the same thing. Except with an added terrorism element.

We arrived at the designated meeting point by the vending machines just down the hall from the gym. O'Reilly wasn't looking for us so I figured we would be okay.

I pulled a flip phone out from my pocket. and shoved it into Alex's hands. "Ten minutes. Meet us after at my place."

"What time?"

"I have no idea. We're gonna book it straight there once it's over. You're sure the doors to the stairs are unlocked?" Everything relied on those stairs being open. If we ran through the school to get outside, they'd see us on the cameras. We had to be sure there was some cover.

"They're unlocked. I'll see you later." Alex took the phone and hurried out the front doors.

I knelt down because DeSean's shoe was untied. I like to think my acting job was a little better than whatever Alex did. I grabbed my lighter from home and carefully lit the fuse while the guys provided me with a bit of a human wall. It took four strikes to get the thing to light. I was so nervous, my hands were shaking. When it finally did light, I knew we only had a couple minutes before it went off.

Before we entered the gym, Tracy came walking out with her phone in her hand. I almost stopped to tell her she needed to leave, but I couldn't. Nobody could know I knew anything. I felt horrible for getting her involved. I promised I'd help her out and now she was stuck in the middle. I just gave her a nod as we entered the gym.

Go time.

## Ashley

When Beth finally calmed down, I promised I'd take her home. She needed to get out of there. I was kind of surprised when she asked me to stay over for a bit and talk, but accepted without a second thought. I just needed to make a pit stop in the gym and let the girls know they'd need to find other rides to the parties they were going to.

As we walked back into the main hallway, we saw Vinny and the other basketball guys shutting and locking Spencer's locker. Beth reached over and pulled me back so they couldn't see. I almost protested, but things began to click in my head and I kept my mouth shut. They ran off without spotting us.

Beth ran over, her high heels clopping on the ground. I kept watch while she began entering the combination, her fingers moving so fast that she kept messing up.

"How do you know Spencer's combination?" I asked.

"Lauren." Her eyes were transfixed on the lock.

The door opened and we looked inside. It was as messy as it was when he and I shared this at the start of the year. Even after just a week, it looked like a bomb went off inside. Beth began digging around inside and froze when she found a full brown paper bag. She used a crumpled up piece of paper to lift the bag up. I guess it was to avoid getting fingerprints on it.

When she opened it, we both gasped.

It was full of every type of drug and paraphernalia imaginable. Pills, tablets, vials, needles, powder, rocks, weed. My eyes locked on the cocaine as soon as I saw it. It was hypnotizing. Like an old girlfriend trying to reconnect after you broke up. I wanted to look away and remember that I was better off now, but I couldn't.

"Vinny."

"Fuck."

Beth looked all around us. "Find me something to cover it with."

I scrambled around the hall to find something, anything. There was black sweater on a bench and I grabbed it. Beth carefully covered the bag up tight and tucked it underneath her chest like a football.

"We gotta get this out of here. Now."

And so we ran. We ran to the door that led to the football field. It was the only place we could think to go. We knew the door would be unlocked and it was closer than the front doors, which were guarded by the security guy. The glass door shut behind us and we sprinted for the blind spot by the field house.

## Spencer

Lauren was gone for a long time. I was starting to get nervous. When she came back and sat down beside me, I could tell she had been crying. I wasn't sure why, though. I thought she hurt herself or someone in her family died or something. I didn't want her to be upset.

"What happened?" I asked.

She grabbed me by the collar, pulled me in close, and kissed me as hard as she could. I could taste the salt from her tears. When she pulled away, she said, "I'm just sure that this wasn't a mistake."

We held each other for a moment before a slow song began to play again. I owed her a dance so I stood and offered her my hand. She wiped her eyes and took it. We wandered out to the center of the gym.

We were going to be named Homecoming King and Queen when the ceremony began in ten minutes. My leg felt better than ever. I was dating the most amazing girl in the world. Everything was just so right.



## Vinny

O'Reilly asked us why we were gone for so long and we just kind of ignored him. I gave some bullshit answer and he just kinda let us go. Thank God because the fuse was ticking down. We only had about a minute.

I nodded to Lonnie and he ran back over to Sarah. I nodded to the other guys and they took their places, too. They had thirty seconds to find whoever they could and tell them to be ready. I guided DeSean through the crowd, the smell of smoke filling my nose. I wasn't sure if it was actual smoke or just my brain messing with me. I wasn't going to look down to see, though. I knew if I did, I'd be caught. I just knew it.

That was when I saw him. He was dancing with Lauren in the middle of the gym. If they had been at their table, the first place we were going to look, or literally anywhere else in the gym, he might have been safe. They'd have seen DeSean coming. But they just had to have their little "belle of the ball" moment and be in the middle of things.

I gave DeSean's shoulder a reassuring squeeze and he nodded. Every step was calculated. DeSean knew exactly how much time he had before he had to pull the strings and he milked every last second from them. No room for errors here. He wandered behind Lauren and stopped to readjust his crutch.

That was when he pulled the string.

Some people will say I was being greedy. That I should have just settled with having the cops bust him for the bag and this was just daring me to get caught and sent to prison. To them, I ask why it matters. Spencer was a demon. A manipulative asshole who gets everything he wants. Being the first one to knock his lights out when this went down was the greatest possible outcome for me. I wasn't going to let him threaten me or Victoria or anyone else again.

The music was too loud for anyone to hear the clang of the metal can hitting the ground, but I heard it. At least, I think I did. Lauren and Spencer turned around when a puff of smoke began to emerge from the can. The movie showed how much smoke could be made from one of these things. I figured we wouldn't have enough ping-pong balls to make enough smoke, but I was wrong. So, so wrong. The difference between the movie and real life (besides the fact that they just pumped smoke into the set to make it seem stronger than it was) was the fact that we were inside a closed gym with poor air circulation.

It got smokey really, *really* fast.

I never lost sight of Spencer, though. I rushed in as soon as I felt like there was enough smoke to cover me and threw the first punch. I connected with his nose and heard him shout in pain. It was the only one I allowed myself to throw. A bunch of the guys said they would gladly have rushed into the smoke and battered the fucker with me, but I said no. Too many people would cause too much attention. Between the drugs and the smoke, we had more than enough of that to go around.

Lonnie was tasked with finding the smoke bomb and he brought a pair of goggles from the chemistry lab and some oven mitts from home to do so. When he found it, he had to bury it inside a backpack and run like hell.

When the fire alarm came on, we ran for the back exit. I nearly crushed a Freshman kid as I turned the corner. My knuckle hurt real bad from punching that piece of shit's potato head. It was the sweetest pain I'd ever felt in my life.

## Beth

My biggest fear was one of the needles not having a cap on it. I didn't know where those guys found all that shit. For all I knew, they could have been stuff they found under the bridge. But we had to get out of there so I held the sweater and the bag inside of it as tight as possible. God, I was so out of shape. Not fat, but definitely not winning any marathons.

This was never the plan. I was supposed to give him the locker combination and let him run wild. I figured they would do something petty like steal his phone or plant some booze in his locker. Something of low stakes and was incredibly stupid that would get him in trouble. Vinny was never supposed to go this far. This was *not* the plan.

The only place we could think to run to was the blind spot between the field house and the football stadium. There was a little hill that we could sit down on and catch our breaths. Ashley beat me there. I was sweating like a pig by the time we sat down.

"What are we supposed to do with that?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said, chugging down air. "But we can't just wait around. Let's get out of here."

She looked over her shoulder. "Football field."

It was the only place we could think of going on short notice. We *should* have just dumped it in a bush and run away, but we weren't thinking straight. So when Ashley took off running, I was right behind her. We didn't stop running until we were up and over the small chain link fence on the northern side of the stadium. I'm not exactly the most athletic so it says a lot about how they should really put in something stronger than a five foot tall fence to keep people out of a multimillion dollar football field.

Ashley just kinda wandered around until she collapsed in the end zone. I joined her, plopping down on my side, no wind left in my system. "I really need to start doing cardio," I said. She laughed.

That was when I decided to dig through the bag and see what they had. It was pretty obvious that they wanted to frame him for possession and get him arrested. This wasn't what I had wanted. I just wanted them to kick his ass. Now I just regretted ever encouraging this.

The bag had everything a wannabe drug dealer could wish for. Weed, pills, what I assumed were crack rocks. I'm not exactly an expert on Class A drugs so don't quote me on this. But what I did recognize well was the bag full of a fine white powder. I'd seen a lot of the stuff when I had to talk Ashley off of the ledge a couple of weeks ago. She was staring up at the stars when I looked over at her.

"You want something?" It was a joke and I had hoped she would pick up on that, but I was curious how she would react.

"I think I'll be okay."

"You sure?"

"I'm clean now. I flushed my stash. Honest."

I made sure the bag was sealed up tight. The last thing we needed was some kid tripping in the end zone and landing on a pile of painkillers. "I believe you."

"Why would he put that into Spencer's locker?" she asked. "I thought they were cool now."

I knew the truth, but I'd never say it to her. Or anyone. "I have no idea. But he obviously wanted to frame him. I mean, why do it at all? Just tip off O'Reilly or the security guy and then get the cops involved. And maybe they realize that he didn't actually ever touch the stuff and they are forced to let him go and he's always known as *the drug guy* whenever he comes back to school and when he applies for jobs and school and stuff."

"And if they didn't realize he was innocent..."

“We don’t have to worry about that now.”

I’ve never been good at delivering bad news. Sometimes I try to be as empathetic as possible and make things easier to hear, but I always find a way to upset people. The look Ashley gave me when she heard that one of her closest friends could have had his life ruined can’t be put to words. Her soul died.

But then she got angry. *Very* angry. “What a scumbag piece of shit.”

I was about to speak when I saw the alarm lights blinking in the windows and the muffled blare of the sirens going off back inside the school. When I looked, Ashley did, too. We didn’t know what to say or do. A few seconds later, the back doors burst open and six or so guys ran out, laughing and cheering.

“What’s going on?” Ashley whispered, ducking down low to the ground. I followed.

One last guy ran out of the school, yelling at the others to keep running. They listened, but they kept yelling with joy as they ran. I didn’t recognize their voices, we were too far away.

“I have a feeling we’ll find out soon,” I said.

Ashley looked back at the school. “Wait, no, something’s really wrong. This wasn’t just some dumb prank, I think that was Vinny! Shit, shit, shit! We have to go back for Kate and Lauren and everyone else!”

It was very spur of the moment. I had to be strong for the two of us. “No,” I said. “We can’t.”

She looked at me like I was insane. “What are you talking about?! What if something happened to them?! We have to help them!”

“It’s too late. We need to protect ourselves.”

“Bullshit! We can’t just abandon our friends!”

Someone had to step up and keep us both safe. It was up to me. “Whatever is going on in there isn’t our problem.” I held the sweat up. “*This is*. We need to get this out of here *now*. We stay here, we can claim ignorance when the cops show up and start taking names. We go back, we’ll be right back in the middle of things. Do you want that?”

I could see her begin to waver. “No, but we can’t just leave them—”

“I know you care about them, but we are putting ourselves at risk if we don’t get out of here. For all we know, they started a grease fire and the whole school is burning to the ground. You can go if you want to. But I’m not going to prison. And if they find the drugs, then what? At least here, we can ensure they get away safely. If we go back, we’re leaving everything up to fate. This is the only way we can protect ourselves *and* Spencer. Lauren and Kate will understand. They wouldn’t want us getting hurt.”

She was speechless. No more protesting came. Much as she may hate me, she knew I was right. “What are you going to do with that?” she finally asked.

“Whatever I have to do to get rid of it.”

“My mom won’t be back for another week. Take it to my place if yours isn’t safe.”

I wanted to question why she wanted it so badly, but I believed her when she said she was clean. I wanted to, anyway. If she bothered to flush her stash in the first place, she was stronger than I gave her credit for.

“Okay. I trust you.” I waited a second before lowering my voice and saying, “I’m sorry you got involved in all this.”

She couldn’t help but smile a little. “You know, I never thought I’d hear you say that.”

“What? I’m sorry?”

“No. You trust me.”

A smile of my own began to spread across my face. “I know I can be a horrible person, but I’m also an honest one.”

"Yeah. You are. No offense." I caught her eyes glancing up and down my body. It was the first time she'd ever seen me in a dress. I didn't mind all that much. I felt nice to be admired. "You know, I think I finally see what Lauren sees in you," she said when she looked back up.

"*Saw*," I corrected.

"Never seen it."

I gave her a playful shove and we both laughed. "So what did she see in me?"

"I really can't describe it."

"Well, shit, you sure know how to make a girl blush, huh?"

"No, like... I don't know. I can't describe it. Like, I don't know the words."

"Confident? Determined? Devilishly good-looking?" I winked. We both giggled a little.

"Um... well, yeah. Yeah, all of those things."

"You're actually a really sweet person," I said.

She groaned. "Don't mock me for *saying* I don't know how to make someone blush with a compliment like *that*."

"Come on, who do I look like? William Shakespeare?" I smirked. "But you are. You're completely different from last year. I don't know... kinder." I could tell that meant a lot to her. I instantly felt weird for bringing it up so I changed gears. "And besides, Lauren was always the lovey-dovey one."

She smiled and remembered. "Yeah. She was. So what were you?"

I decided to be completely honest. I was never good with words. I let my actions do the talking for me. "The one who would do anything to make her happy."

She looked at me. "Yeah?"

I stared back. "Yeah."

Blue and red lights flickered through the streets, sirens getting louder and louder. Our eyes went wide. We'd waited too long to leave. We counted our lucky stars when we saw that the lights weren't going for the stadium. They were headed for the main building.

"We have to go," I said.

"Let's get back to my place."

We stood and leapt like deer over the fence (is what I would say if I was half as athletic as Ashley and totally didn't almost fall flat on my face when I made the jump.) We made it through to the main street and just started running. It was past nine so there wasn't much foot traffic. And then we just ran. My hair was ruined.

## Lauren

Everything happened so fast. At first, there was just a lot of smoke. I thought a pipe burst or something. But then the fire alarm went off and the lights flicked back on and everyone started screaming. I felt someone push me while it was still dark, but I thought someone ran into me by accident. All I could do was run for the exit. I didn't even think about Spencer until I was out the door. We got separated in the smoke. By then, there were hundreds of people sprinting through the doors and there was no chance of me getting back inside.

So I waited outside of the school. The panic died down once we all got outside. Half of the people who were at the dance jumped into their friends' cars and headed home. I wanted to, but I needed to find all of my friends and make sure Spencer got out okay.

The first person I found was Kate. I guess she got separated from the others. I hugged her. She was shaking. Then we found Casey and Heather wandering around and ran over to them.

"Have either of you seen Spencer?" I asked, failing to hide my growing dread.

"No," they said in unison.

"I'm sure he's fine," Kate said for the fifth time since we met up. She had been trying to reassure me this whole time, but I wasn't listening. I feel like an ass for not letting her comfort me, but I was too worked up. I managed to lose my boyfriend when the school might be burning to the ground.

Heather looked over my shoulder and her eyes went wide. "Guys, look!"

We all turned in unison and saw bright blue and red lights flicking back and forth in our direction. Sirens began to blare. Half of the crowd that remained abandoned the crowd that had formed in the parking lot and sprinted away to find safety. We were all too scared to follow and I didn't have a way to drive out of here now.

Then I saw the SWAT guys hanging off of the side of an armored car, automatic rifles in hand. The van stopped and they disembarked, guns raised. There were also a couple K-9 vans behind them. It was the single most terrifying moment of my life.

They just started screaming some variation of "GET ON THE GROUND! ALL OF YOU, ON THE GROUND! HANDS UP AND ON THE GROUND!" over and over and over.

The flashlights on their guns blinded me. I did what they told me and dropped right down to the ground. I ruined my dress.

Mr. O'Reilly ran forward from his meeting with the other faculty members, arms flailing around like one of those tube men at a car dealership. "Wait! Stop! What are you—" One of the SWAT guys ran forward and tackled him with all the force of an NFL linebacker. He slammed down to the ground and the cops handcuffed him. I wanted to laugh, but I couldn't find the joy.

With all of us secured, they began a search of the school. More kids filed out in straight lines with guns raised around them. A bunch of people were crying now. I thought somebody had started shooting or something. Nobody ever thinks this kinda thing is going to happen at their school and then it does. I began to worry about Beth and Ashley. They were still inside, but I couldn't go after them now.

I think ten minutes passed when the ambulance finally arrived and my heart began to shatter like glass. The paramedics rushed inside with a gurney. I held Kate and Heather's hands and they held Casey's. I was dreading what was going to come out of there.

When it did come out, nobody could make out who was on it. They were surrounded by a wall of paramedics and police. But I saw. When they lowered it down from the curb onto the street, I recognized his face. Sort of. It was so badly beaten and bloody that I thought I was looking at Rocky.

I tried to stand up and run to him, but a cop grabbed me by the waist and held me back. “Let me go! I’m his girlfriend! Let me go! *Please!*” I cried and sobbed, but they didn’t care. The girls stood up to make sure I was okay and stopped when they saw who was on the gurney.

Spencer got loaded into the ambulance and driven off while I wept in the grass.

## Ashley

It took me three tries to unlock my front door. We had more or less sprinted for twenty minutes straight to get back to my house. Cop car after cop car came barreling down the road, which forced us to either stop or duck into an alleyway to avoid being seen. Whatever was going on at that school had the police going crazy. My stomach was in knots just thinking about it.

Once we got inside, we collapsed on the couch. I felt like Usain Bolt or something, but we totally didn't exactly set any landspeed records on that run. After I took a second, I stood up and stumbled into the kitchen. I never poured ice water so fast in my life. I just needed to get back off of my feet. When I handed Beth the glass, she drank it down like a horse.

"Don't make yourself sick," I warned. I remember when Spencer told me about the time he drank so much water that he got sick right in the middle of practice. Overheating, overworking, and overdrinking are a dangerous combination.

She lifted her mouth up from the glass to say, "Worth it." and went right back to chugging the glass down.

It took everything in me not to do the same. I was so thirsty and sweaty and tired. The dress and the heels made things so much harder to run. We eventually ditched our shoes after trying to run in them. We made it around three blocks before they hurt too badly to continue. Now my feet were all cut up from running on rocks and warm concrete. I glanced down at Beth's feet. They were all bloody.

"What?" she asked. When she saw them, she winced. "I thought I smelled blood."

"We gotta get ourselves cleaned up." I took her hand and led her upstairs to the bathroom. Now that the adrenaline had mostly worn off, every step was like walking on a bed of nails.

I ran the water until it was nice and warm. Beth sat on a chair I brought in from my desk and placed her feet inside the tub, gasping from the heat but quickly settling in. I watched the water begin to swirl with red blood and brown and black dust from the dirty roads. I took a washcloth and tried to help clean her off as gently as possible. She bit her lip when I ran over the underside of her foot, but stayed quiet.

"Sorry," I whispered.

"It's okay," she said, trying to relax. "Alright, get the peroxide."

I took the brown bottle and poured some on a cotton ball. The soles of her feet were cut up pretty bad. Like she stepped on a lightbulb or something. I thought she might need stitches, but she insisted she was fine. "This is gonna hurt, you know." She nodded and braced herself. When I pressed the cotton against the largest cut, she jumped a little.

"You know... they're gonna ask why... shit! Why your car was still there and you weren't."

"Yeah. I know." I was more focused on cleaning her up than all of the drama.

"We're gonna... fuck, that hurts so bad. It's alright, just keep going. I'll be fine. But anyway, we're gonna need a cover story."

I chuckled. "I took you home with me. That's a pretty good cover story."

She laughed, despite the pain. "Funny."

"So what's yours?" I asked, trying to keep her from jumping again. I was nearly done.

She thought about it. "I couldn't stand the sight of my ex being happy with someone else so I stormed off and went home to cry."

I glanced up at her. "That would mean you'd need to come out to *everyone* who asks you where you went. Administration included. You know that, right?"

"Beats being a suspect in a drug deal gone wrong. I'll figure something out. I was more worried about you right now. You're the one they're gonna miss"

I wanted to protest and say people would care, but I knew it would just lead to unnecessary fighting. When I was done, I wrapped her up with some bandages and gauze. She was good as new. I watched the red and brown water swirl as it went down the drain. When it was gone, I poured in some fresh water and took my socks off. I wasn't hurt as badly as Beth, but my feet were absolutely killing me. The warm water helped so much.

"Go grab a shirt from my dresser if you want," I offered. I needed to get out of this dress and I know she probably wanted to as well.

"You sure?"

"Second one is shirts, third is pants."

Beth nodded and left, leaving me to shut my eyes and try to relax. My brain wouldn't shut itself off, though. I kept thinking about the drugs and the school and Spencer and Lauren. I was worried sick, but I was also too tired to actually do anything about it.

"Is this okay?" I opened my eyes and looked at the doorway. Beth stood there in one of my t-shirts. It was a size too big for her and hung down to her thighs. She had short shorts on underneath that just peeked out of the bottom of the shirt, but the rest of her legs were exposed. She had really nice legs. "I tried the jeans, but they were a little big on me."

"Are you calling me fat?"

"A little."

I wiped my feet off and we went back downstairs to sit on the couch. The only light came from the streetlights. It was kinda spooky. I only then remembered I had my phone and checked it for updates. There was a wave of texts and missed calls from people at school asking if I was okay. I forced myself not to answer. I felt really bad for ignoring Lauren's five missed calls and eight texts. Whatever happened must have been *bad*.

Beth curled up into a ball beside me. "So what's your cover story going to be?"

"I already told you mine." She thought I was kidding so I explained. "I'm just going to be honest with them," I said, glancing down at the crumbled up sweater that was sitting on my coffee table. "I went through something like what you did and I went off to comfort you and be with you in your time of need or whatever."

*Very convincing, asshole.*

"So are you okay with coming out, too?" she asked, her head resting on a pillow.

"Technically I don't *have to* come out. I could just say it was Spencer I was sad about. But... yeah. I think I'm ready. Like, *really* ready. I know I'd talked about it with Lauren for a while and then just never considered it after we broke up because of family shit. But lately... I don't know... I think I'm ready. Especially now that I know Casey and Heather are cool with it. And if you're gonna do it, too... hey, why not, right?"

She smiled. "That's really big of you. I'm proud of you, Ash."

That made me feel so warm inside. Hearing someone be proud of me. I didn't hear that enough.

"Thank you for being with me in my hour of need or whatever, by the way," she said. "For helping this poor little heartbroken girl get over her ex." She was half-joking but also a hint of sincerity. We hadn't talked at all about her panic attack since we left the school. We barely talked about it while it was happening.



"Don't mention it," I said. "I know you'd..." I actually didn't know if she would return the favor if the roles were reversed. We'd hated each other for so long and here we were just hanging out and being... friends.

"I would," she said firmly. "I promise. If you ever need me, you have my number. Just call whenever. Just like last time."

"Okay, Kim Possible."

"Call me, beep me, bitch." She smiled and repositioned herself so she was turned on her side. I turned over to face her. "I'm sorry for making your life miserable for so long."

"Don't be," I said. "After the way I treated you? You were allowed to take some shots back at me. I deserved it."

"Shut up, no you didn't."

"After all I did to make your life miserable? And everything with... Grace? Yeah, I did." It was so hard to hear her name. Just thinking about it made me sad. But talking about her with her ex? That was the hardest thing I'd ever done.

She swallowed hard. "It's okay. It wasn't your fault. Kara was the one who made her life hell. You didn't help, but she was... I don't totally blame you. She used you to get back at someone. I just needed someone to hate and Kara graduated and you were still there. You were the victim, too. It just took me forever to actually admit it to myself. It's not your fault."

*Yes it is.* "You're still allowed to hate me."

"Like I said before. You're a different person from last year. I am, too. I want us to be okay now. I think it'd be good for us."

"Thank you. It means a lot to hear you say that. And if I can be honest for a second, you treating me like shit and being brutally honest with me is what saved my life."

"You could have quit using on your own."

"I'm not talking about the drugs."

We stood inside my Mom's room, the nightstand open in front of us. The gun was on full display for her to see. I felt a twang of shame seeing it again. Ever since I failed at doing something as simple as turning the safety off, I'd been avoiding this room. It was more out of embarrassment than guilt for ever actually trying anything. Part of me was convinced I had actually died that day and this was my purgatory, but I knew I was very much alive. I doubt any higher power would punish someone by making them live in a timeline where their life didn't end because they forgot to turn off the fucking safety.

"Feel free to judge," I said. "I do. Every day."

"You didn't do it," she said. "That's what matters."

"I know." She closed the drawer for me. "So yeah. You kinda saved my life. So... thank you."

"You did that on your own. You didn't need me."

"If you hadn't talked me down in that car and been honest with me, I don't know what I would have done." I knew exactly what I would have done. I would have turned the safety off and done it again for real. She gave me enough encouragement to keep on living a little longer.

"Regardless, you didn't do it. That's what matters."

"I know. I know." I noticed she chose a long sleeve shirt. I only owned two of them and they were buried at the bottom of the drawer. She actively sought that one out. "You should stop doing that, you know." I motioned towards her wrist, which was covered by the sleeve that nearly stretched to her fingertips.

"I know. It's... nevermind."

“We can get you some help. Me, Lauren, Kate. There’s options.”

Without saying another word, Beth reached out and offered me a hug. I took it. I held her as tight as I could without it being weird. I needed this. She still smelled a little like lavender.

She pulled away and looked me over again. “You know, I think I know what Lauren saw in *you* now.”

“What’s that?”

“You smell like vanilla.”

I smiled and said, “Here. Follow me.”

I led her into my room and sat her down on my bed. I took my bottle of lotion out and let her hold it. “Once in the morning, once in the evening only if your skin is dry. Or if you just want to smell like a Christmas cookie. The bottle should last until the Snow Ball so it will be perfect if you decide to go.”

Beth took a small glob of the stuff on her hand and rubbed it over her forearm. She gave it a sniff and looked at me with glee. “This smells amazing!”

“It works really well, too.”

“Why do you use this stuff anyway? Your skin is flawless.”

I blushed a little. Nobody ever complimented my skincare routine that wasn’t one of the girls from the squad, and even then it was just them kissing my ass since I used to be Head Cheerleader. “I used to have terribly dry elbows in grade school. But now? All gone. Prevention is just as important as treatment.”

“Where’d you hear that one from?”

“My uncle’s an exterminator.” I laughed. “And, like, a million beauty YouTubers. I basically owe my life to them. I used to have so many fucking pimples in middle school. *Annnnd* it’s nice to get noticed by other people so it’s worth the cost.”

“Any people in particular?” she asked, looking up at me as she gripped the bottle.

“The ones who matter.”

Beth paused, then sniffed her forearm again and looked at the bottle. “This stuff must be expensive.”

“Not really. Tell you the truth, Lauren gave me a bottle she’d been using for free. I’ve been buying it for, like, fifteen bucks ever since. It’s really no big deal. I can send you the link if that one runs out before Snow Ball. It should last you a while.”

“I’m really grateful for this, but it still costs something. And I’d hate to be in debt to someone.”

I chuckled. “Uh... what do you mean? It’s just a half-empty fifteen dollar bottle of lotion.”

She slowly reached out and rested her hand on mine. “What I’m trying to say... is I’d love to be able to repay you for everything you’ve done for me.”

## Kate

Lauren watched helplessly as the ambulance took off. She was inconsolable. The paramedics wouldn't tell her anything. Casey and Heather kept trying to call Ashley and Frank and Tom, but they weren't picking up. I tried to call Beth, but she wasn't picking up either. We were stuck in limbo as the police interviewed people to see what we knew. I didn't know anything except that the gym got full of smoke and then everyone went crazy.

When we were all done being interviewed, they sent us on our way. There must have been hundreds of us funneling into other people's cars or waiting for our parents to pick us up. Casey, Heather, and I saw Ashley's car waiting in her spot so we began to worry again that she had gotten hurt and was inside. When we asked a cop, he said the building was clear.

Tom showed up out of nowhere and offered to give us a ride. Casey barely let him get a word in because she just kept kissing him and saying she was glad he was okay. He told us that he and Frank ran to the gas station across the street to wait this out, but came back when he finally bothered to check his phone and listen to his missed calls. Frank walked back home.

Lauren was the last one to enter his car, still waiting to see if anyone turned up. When nobody did, she entered without saying a word and we drove to Frank's place. Traffic was terrible with the police holding everyone up. It took us nearly a half-hour to make the eight minute drive to his place.

Nobody said anything during the drive. We were all petrified.

## Vinny

We should have just ran for home, but we were in the mood to celebrate. Everyone was dancing and yelling and singing in the streets. I was shocked nobody called the cops on us. We saw a bunch of patrol cars driving in the direction of the school so I figured they were out of cars to send after us if anybody actually bothered to try making a call.

DeSean gave us the updates from his place in the crowd outside the school. His job was to wait for his mom to get him and fill us in. He told us somebody from the SWAT team slammed O'Reilly into the ground and I almost regretted leaving early. He also said that Spencer got taken away in an ambulance. I wasn't sure if they would make the arrest at the hospital or what, but I hoped it would be soon.

Alex met us at the end of my street. "What happened?" he asked. "I've been checking Twitter and our school is the top trend in the city, but the news has no idea what's going on."

"We fucking won." I felt like fucking Heisenberg. Not Lonnie, the TV character.

Alex gave me and the others a high-five and promised me he made the call and broke the phone and removed the SIM card just like I'd told him to. He kept saying it over and over. I was worried somebody was going to hear.

Victoria called me a hundred times, but I didn't answer. She could wait a little bit longer. She knew that I was going home early to prep for the party that wasn't happening anymore. I hoped Jasmine was taking care of her. When we got inside the house, I went straight for my Dad's liquor cabinet. I broke out a half-empty bottle of whiskey and poured us each a shot. Lonnie didn't drink, but he said he would this one time since it was a party.

"We did it, guys," I said. "It's over."

## Ashley

My dress was sprawled out in a dusty heap at the foot of my bed. It turns out I tore it when I tried jumping that fence. I kinda deserved it for thinking I could just climb a fence like that. It was stupid and a waste of a great dress.

I felt her breath against my neck as I stared up at the ceiling. She nibbled on my ear and whispered, “How do you feel?”

I felt amazing. I hadn’t felt this good in so long. I hadn’t felt like that since I broke up with Lauren. But I didn’t know how to say it. I still felt hazy and tired and drunk. I poured each a glass of wine. Hers sat untouched on the nightstand. We kinda rushed straight to the fun part, but I needed to clear my head beforehand.

“Holy fuck.”

Beth grinned and kissed me again and again. “Good.” I kissed her back and let my hands wander. She had an amazing body. We admired each other’s abs. Who would have thought that Bethany Hill had abs? Not bodybuilder abs, but abs nonetheless.

When we held each other, I felt invincible. It was like when I would get high, except now I had someone to share it with. Someone who made me feel special and wanted. Someone who made me feel beautiful. She made the hours pass like seconds. I wouldn’t have traded that moment for anything in the world.

I finally felt like I had won.